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The Voice of the Past
Oral History



OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
OXFORD LONDON NEW YORK

Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

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NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Thompson, Paul, b.1935
The voice of the past.
1. Oral history
I. Title
907 D13 77-30615

ISBN 0-19-215833-3
ISBN 0-19-289102-2 Pbk

Printed in Great Britain by
Butler & Tanner Ltd, Frome and London

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Introduction

This is a book about both the method, and the meaning, of history. It is, first of all, an introduction to the use of oral sources by the historian. But the very use of these sources raises fundamental issues, and I have decided to take these at the beginning, moving step by step towards the more practical later chapters. At the same time, I have tried to write with many different types of reader in mind. Some may be more immediately concerned with how to design a project, and to collect and evaluate interview material. They will find practical advice in Chapters 5 (Projects), 6 (The Interview) and 7 (Storing and Sifting). There would be, indeed, good sense in starting from field-work. The practical experience of oral history will itself lead on to deeper questions about the nature of history.

These concern, first, the character of evidence. How reliable is oral evidence? How does it compare with the modern historian's more familiar documentary sources? These critical and immediate questions are confronted in Chapter 4 (Evidence). But they are better understood when placed within the wider context of the development of historical writing. Chapter 3 (The Achievement of Oral History) provides an assessment of recent writing and the contribution which oral evidence has made in providing new perspectives and opening up fresh fields of inquiry. Chapter 2 (Historians and Oral History) pursues the question back into the past of history itself, exploring the changing approach of historians to evidence, from the original primacy of oral tradition to the eras of the written document and the tape recorder.

But inevitably this leads to a second set of questions concerning the social function of history. Indeed, it became clear in writing Chapter 2 that the evolution of scholarly techniques could only be convincingly explained in such a social context. And the problems in selecting and evaluating oral evidence had already pointed in the same direction. How do we choose who to listen to? History survives as a social activity only because it has a meaning for people today. The voice of the past matters to the present. But whose voice—or voices—are to be heard?

Thus, while method and meaning can be treated as independent themes, they are at bottom inseparable. The choice of evidence must reflect the role of history in the community. This is in part a political question, on which historians can only reach their own position independently. Consequently, although even here most of the argument is straightforwardly human rather than political, Chapter 1 (History and the Community) is written from a socialist perspective. And I myself believe that the richest possibilities for oral history lie within the development of a more socially conscious and democratic history. Of course, a telling case could equally be made, from a conservative position, for the use of oral history in preserving the full richness and value of tradition. The merit of oral history is not that it entails this or that political stance, but that it leads historians to an awareness that their activity is inevitably pursued within a social context and with political implications.

This, then, is a practical book about how oral sources can be collected and used by historians. But it is equally intended to provoke historians to ask themselves what they are doing, and why. On whose authority is their reconstruction of the past based? For whom is it intended? In short, *whose* is *The Voice of the Past*?

I have been fortunate in writing in being able to depend on the help of many friends and colleagues, especially in the Oral History Society and at the University of Essex. It is impossible to acknowledge more than a very few separately but I should like to thank them all. In ten years of research activity and student projects, and a widening circle of discus-

sions and conferences, experiments, mistakes, and successes have built up a widely shared collective experience It is on this that the book rests Above all, it draws on the joint work, in research and then in graduate teaching, through which Thea Vigne and I came upon and ourselves explored the possibilities of oral evidence in social history I owe an immeasurable debt to her I should also like to thank again those others who are mentioned in the preface to the first-fruit of that research, *The Edwardians*, and particularly George Ewart Evans and Mary Girling And for this present text, for specific contributions to it and for comments on earlier drafts, I am especially grateful to Keith Thomas, Geoffrey Hawthorn, Bill Williams, Colin Bundy, Trevor Lummis, Roy Hay, Michael Winstanley, Gina Harkell, Joanna Bornat, Alun Howkins, Eve Hostettler, Natasha Burchardt, and Raphael Samuel

I

History and the Community

All history depends ultimately upon its social purpose This is why in the past it has been handed down by oral tradition and written chronicle, and why today professional historians are supported from public funds, children are taught history in schools, amateur history societies flourish all over Britain, and popular history books are among the strongest best-sellers Sometimes the social purpose of history is obscure for example, academics who pursue fact finding research on remote problems without attempting to relate their discoveries to any more general interpretations, insisting on the technical virtue of scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, are merely concerned that they and their salaries are protected from interference, while in return they offer no challenge to the social system At the other extreme the social purpose of history can be quite blatant used to provide justification for war and conquest, territorial seizure, revolution and counter-revolution, the rule of one class or race over another Between these two extremes are many other purposes, more or less obvious Through history ordinary people seek to understand the upheavals and changes which they experience in their own lives wars, social transformations like the changing position of youth, technological changes like the end of steam power, or personal migration to a new community Through local history a village or town seeks meaning for its own changing character and newcomers can gain a sense of roots in personal historical knowledge Through political and social history taught in schools children are helped to understand, and accept, how the political and social system under which they live came

about, and how force and conflict have played, and continue to play, their part in that evolution.

The challenge of oral history lies partly in relation to this essential social purpose of history. This is a major reason why it has so excited some historians, and so frightened others. In fact, fear of oral history as such is groundless. We shall see later that the use of interviews as a source by professional historians is long-standing and perfectly compatible with scholarly standards. American experience shows clearly enough that the oral history method can be regularly used in a socially and politically conservative manner; or indeed pushed as far as sympathy with Fascism in John Toland's new portrait of *Adolf Hitler* (New York, 1976).

Oral history is not necessarily an instrument for change; it depends upon the spirit in which it is used. Nevertheless, oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself, and open up new areas of inquiry; it can break down barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside; and in the writing of history—whether in books, or museums, or radio and film—it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.

Until the present century, the focus of history was essentially political: a documentation of the struggle for power, in which the lives of ordinary people, or the workings of the economy or religion, were given little attention except in times of crisis such as the Reformation, the English Civil War, or the French Revolution. Even local history was concerned with the administration of the hundred and parish rather than the day-to-day life of the community and the street. This was partly because historians, who themselves then belonged to the administering and governing classes, thought that this was what mattered most. They had developed no interest in the point of view of the labourer, unless he was specifically troublesome; nor—being men—would they have wished to inquire into the changing life experiences of women. But even if they had wished to write a different

kind of history, it would have been far from easy, for the raw material from which history was written, the documents, had been kept or destroyed by people with the same priorities The more personal, local, and unofficial a document, the less likely it was to survive This has remained true even after the establishment of local record offices Registers of births and marriages, minutes of councils and Boards of Guardians, national and county newspapers, schoolteachers' log books—legal records of all kinds are kept in quantity, very often there are also accounts and other books from large private firms and landed estates, and even private correspondence from the ruling landowner class But of the innumerable postcards, letters, diaries, and ephemera of working class men and women, or the papers of small businesses like corner shops or hill farmers, for example, very little has been preserved anywhere

Consequently, even as the scope of history has widened, the original political and administrative focus has remained Where ordinary people have been brought in, it has been generally as statistical aggregates derived from some earlier administrative investigation Thus economic history is constructed around three types of source aggregate rates of wages, prices, and unemployment, national and international political interventions into the economy and the information which arises from these, and studies of particular trades and industries, depending on the bigger and more successful firms for records of individual enterprises Similarly, labour history has focused on the one hand on the relationship between the working classes and the state in general, and on the other on particular but essentially institutional accounts of trade unions and working class political organizations, and, inevitably, it is the larger and more successful organizations which normally leave records or commission their own histories Again, social history has been concerned with legislative and administrative developments like the rise of the Welfare State, or with aggregate data such as population size, birth rates, age at marriage, household and family structure And among more recent historical specialisms, demography has been almost exclusively

with aggregates; the history of the family has tended to follow the lines of conventional social history; while women's history has to a remarkable extent focused on the political struggle for civil equality, and above all for the vote.

There are, of course, important exceptions in each of these fields, which show that different approaches are possible even with the existing sources. And there is a remarkable amount of unexploited personal and ordinary information even in official records—such as court documents—which can be used in new ways. The continuing pattern of historical writing probably reflects the priorities of the majority of the profession—even if no longer of the ruling class itself—in an age of bureaucracy, state power, science, and statistics. Nevertheless, it remains true that to write any other kind of history from documentary sources remains a very difficult task, requiring special ingenuity. It is indicative of the situation that E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and James Hinton's *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (1973) each depended to a large extent on reports by paid government informers, in the early nineteenth century and First World War respectively. When socialist historians are reduced to writing history from the records of government spies, the constraints imposed are clearly extreme. We cannot, alas, interview tombstones, but at least for the First World War period and back into the late nineteenth century, the use of oral history immediately provides a rich and varied source for the creative historian.

In the most general sense, once the life experience of people of all kinds can be used as its raw material, a new dimension is given to history. Oral history provides a source quite similar in character to published autobiography, but much wider in scope. The overwhelming majority of published autobiographies are from a restricted group of political, social, and intellectual leaders, and even when the historian is lucky enough to find an autobiography from the particular place, time, and social group which he happens to need, it may well give little or no attention to the point at issue. Oral historians, by contrast, may choose precisely whom to inter-

view and what to ask about The interview will provide, too, a means of discovering written documents and photographs which would not have otherwise been traced The confines of the scholar's world are no longer the well thumbed volumes of the old catalogue Oral historians can think now as if they themselves were publishers imagine what evidence is needed, seek it out, and capture it

For most existing kinds of history, probably the critical effect of this new approach is to allow evidence from a new direction The historian of working class politics can juxtapose the statements of the government or the trade union headquarters with the voice of the rank and file—both apathetic and militant There can be no doubt that this should make for a more realistic reconstruction of the past Reality is complex and many sided, and it is a primary merit of oral history that to a much greater extent than most sources it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be recreated But this advantage is important not just for the writing of history Most historians make implicit or explicit judgements—quite properly, since the social purpose of history demands an understanding of the past which relates directly or indirectly to the present Modern professional historians are less open with their social message than Macaulay or Marx, since scholarly standards are seen to conflict with declared bias But the social message is usually present, however obscured It is quite easy for a historian to give most of his attention and quotations to those social leaders whom he admires, without giving any direct opinion of his own Since the nature of most existing records is to reflect the standpoint of authority, it is not surprising that the judgement of history has more often than not vindicated the wisdom of the powers that be Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated It provides a more realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account In so doing, oral history has radical implications for the social message of history as a whole

At the same time oral history implies for most kinds of

history some shift of focus. Thus the educational historian becomes concerned with the experiences of children and students as well as the problems of teachers and administrators. The military and naval historian can look beyond command level strategy and equipment to the conditions, recreations, and morale of other ranks and the lower deck. The social historian can turn from bureaucrats and politicians to poverty itself, and learn how the poor saw the relieving officer and how they survived his refusals. The political historian can approach the voter at home and at work; and can hope to understand even the working-class Conservative, who produced no newspapers or organizations for him to investigate. The economist can watch both employer and worker as social beings and at their ordinary work, and so come closer to understanding the typical economic process, and its successes and contradictions.

In some fields, oral history can result not merely in a shift in focus, but also in the opening up of important new areas of inquiry. Labour historians, for example, are enabled for the first time to undertake effective studies of the ill-unionized majority of male workers, of women workers, and of the normal experience of work and its impact on the family and the community. They are no longer confined to those trades which were unionized, or those which gained contemporary publicity and investigation because of strikes or extreme poverty. Urban historians similarly can turn from well-explored problem areas like the slums to look at other typical forms of urban social life: the small industrial or market town, for example, or the middle-class surburb, constructing the local patterns of social distinctions, mutual help between neighbours and kin, leisure and work. They can even approach from the inside the history of immigrant groups—a kind of history which is certain to become more important in Britain, and is mainly documented only from outside as a social problem. These opportunities—and many others—are shared by social historians: the study of working-class leisure and culture, for example; or of crime from the point of view of the ordinary, often undetected and socially semi-tolerated poacher, shoplifter, or work-pilferer.

Perhaps the most striking feature of all, however, is the transforming impact of oral history upon the history of the family Without its evidence, the historian can discover very little indeed about either the ordinary family's contacts with neighbours and kin, or its internal relationships The roles of husband and wife, the upbringing of girls and boys, emotional and material conflicts and dependence, the struggle of youth for independence, courtship, sexual behaviour within and outside marriage, contraception and abortion—all these were effectively secret areas The only clues were to be gleaned from aggregate statistics, and from a few—usually partial—observers The historical paucity which results is well summed up in Michael Anderson's brilliant, speculative, but abstract study of *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* (1971) a lop sided, empty frame With the use of interviewing, it is now possible to develop a much fuller history of the family over the last ninety years, and to establish its main patterns and changes over time, and from place to place, during the life cycle and between the sexes The history of childhood as a whole becomes practicable for the first time And given the dominance of the family through housework, domestic service, and motherhood in the lives of most women, an almost equivalent broadening of scope is brought to the history of women

In all these fields of history, by introducing new evidence from the underside, by shifting the focus and opening new areas of inquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to substantial groups of people who had been ignored, a cumulative process of transformation is set in motion The scope of historical writing itself is enlarged and enriched, and at the same time its social message changes History becomes, to put it simply, more democratic The chronicle of kings has taken into its concern the life experience of ordinary people But there is another dimension to this change, of equal importance The process of writing history changes along with the content The use of oral evidence breaks through the barriers between the chroniclers and

centred approach, for it uses as the project's basis the child's own knowledge of its family and kin and access to photographs, old letters and documents, newspaper cuttings, and memories. Equally, family history encourages the involvement of parents in school activity.

A child's own family history represents perhaps the simplest type of project subject. It is more suited to suggesting than to solving a historical problem. Older groups are likely to choose some issue of more collective interest. At Corpus Christi College, Oxford, for example, Brian Harrison led a group of his students in a small research study on the history of college servants, a group of workers whose deferential respect for their employers, loyalty, meticulousness in their craft, and formality of dress and manner, are frequently perplexing to the typical modern young undergraduate. Through the project the students came to a better understanding of the college servants—and vice versa—and at the same time of the significance of history itself. As one commented: 'I found equally important and interesting ... seeing the impact of social change in really close detail ... how changes in the general social environment changed the style of life, values, and relationships within a traditional community.'[1] The immediate environment also gains, through the sense of discovery in interviews, a vivid historical dimension: an awareness of the past which is not just known, but personally felt. This is especially true for a newcomer to a community or district. It is one thing to know that streets or fields around a home had a past before one's own arrival; quite different to have received from the remembered past, still alive in the minds of the older people of the place, personal intimacies of love across those particular fields, neighbours and homes in that particular street, work in that particular shop.

Such fragmentary facts are not merely evocative in themselves, but can be used as the raw material for worthwhile history. It is possible for even a single student in a summer vacation project, with interviews, to make a useful extension of historical knowledge—and also to create new resources which others may be able to use later. With a group

the opportunities naturally enlarge. The number of interviews can be greater, the archival searches more extensive, the subject more ambitious.

The group project has some special characteristics of its own. Instead of the atmosphere of competition common in education, it requires a spirit of intellectual co-operation. Isolated reading, examinations, and lecture sessions give way to collaborative historical research. The joint inquiry will also bring teachers and students into a much closer, less hierarchical relationship, giving far more chance of informal contact between them. Their dependence will become mutual. The teacher may bring special experience in interpretation and in knowledge of existing sources, but will rely on the support of the students as organizers and fieldworkers. In these ways some of the students are likely to show unexpected skills. The best essay-writer is not necessarily the best interviewer—nor is the teacher. A much more equal situation is created. But, paradoxically, at the same time, by resolving—or at least suspending—the conflict between research and teaching, it enables the teacher to be a better professional. The group project is both research and teaching, inextricably mixed, and as a result each is done more effectively.

The essential value of both group and single projects is, however, similar. Students can share in the excitements and satisfactions of creative historical research of intrinsic worth. At the same time they gain personal experience of the difficulties of such work. They formulate an interpretation or theory and then find exceptional facts which are difficult to explain away. They find that the people whom they interview do not fit easily into the social types presented by the preliminary reading. They need facts, or people, or records which prove tantalizingly elusive. They encounter the problems of bias, contradiction, and interpretation in evidence. Above all, they are brought back from the grand patterns of written history to the awkwardly individual human lives which are its basis.

Both kinds of project also have the important consequence of taking education out of its institutional retreats into the

world Both sides gain from this Interviewing can bring together people from different social classes and age groups who would otherwise rarely meet, let alone get to know each other closely Much of the widespread hostility to students is based on little knowledge of what they are actually like or do, and these meetings can bring an appreciation of the serious-mindedness and idealism which is widespread among them They can also show ordinary people that history need not be irrelevant to their own lives Conversely, teachers and students can become more directly aware of the image which they present to the wider public And through entering into the lives of their informants, they gain more understanding of values which they do not share, and often respect for the courage shown in lives much less privileged than their own

Yet the nature of the interview implies a breaking of the boundary between the educational institution and the world, between the professional and the ordinary public, more fundamental than this For the historian comes to the interview to learn to sit at the feet of others who, because they come from a different social class, or are less educated, or older, know more about something The reconstruction of history itself becomes a much more widely collaborative process, in which non professionals must play a critical part By giving a central place in its writing and presentation to people of all kinds, history gains immensely And old people especially benefit too An oral history project can not only bring them new social contacts and sometimes lead to lasting friendships, it can render them an inestimable service Too often ignored, and economically emasculated, it can give back to them a dignity, a sense of purpose, in going back over their lives and handing on valuable information to a younger generation

These changes made possible through oral history are not confined to the writing of books or projects They also affect the presentation of history in museums, record offices, and libraries These all now have a means of infusing life into their collections, and through this, of bringing themselves into a more active relationship with their community They can set up their own special research projects, like the

East Anglian museums' study of the sugar-beet industry, or the Imperial War Museum programmes on early aviation and on conscientious objectors. A few museums are also using tapes as a sound accompaniment to their displays, either directly explanatory or for evocative atmosphere. The display itself can at the same time be reformulated so that it comes closer to the historical original. The 'period setting' for objects becomes the reconstruction of a real room, with, for example, tools and shavings and half-made baskets left about as if the craftsman was still using it. Older local people, when they look at this room, are likely to have comments, and may even help with improvements by offering articles of their own. In one particularly lively East London museum, if an attendant hears this kind of conversation going on, he alerts one of the curators, and the old person is immediately offered a cup of tea and a chance to record some of his own impressions on the spot. And if the first impromptu session proves fruitful, others follow. Some of the recordings are later used in educational tapes lent to the local schools; and weekends have been arranged for the schoolchildren—normally Sixth Formers—to meet the old people. Thus an active dialogue develops between old people, their own local history, and a museum which has become a social centre. Here is a model of a social role for history with great potential, which needs to be taken up elsewhere.

The use of interviewing for historical presentation in broadcasting is of course long-standing. Here indeed is a fine tradition of oral history techniques which goes back many years—in fact well before the term 'oral history' was introduced. Professional historians are of course given their own chance for brief lectures in the intervals between programmes on Radio Three. But most of those I know show much more interest in those radio and television programmes which re-evoke history through the use of raw material, some of it dating from the original period, some recorded retrospectively. For the historian of the future the preservation of many of these programmes, along with others in the B.B.C. Sound Archives, will provide a rich source. It is very unfortunate that at present, by contrast, only a very small pro-

portion of what is being broadcast on television is being preserved, and historians have shown curiously little interest in this systematic destruction of records.

In historical broadcasting it is the introduction of people, the original actors, which brings the programmes alive. Some local radio stations have deliberately used this type of programme to encourage links and exchanges with their local community. There have also been experiments with the use of the oral history approach in film making. Admittedly it presents some severe problems. A series of interwoven interviews easily becomes visually repetitive, and—despite vivid moments—lacks dramatic action. An alternative, controversial approach was tried in the filming of 'Akenfield'. Here two kinds of oral material were used. The script of the narrator was put together by Ronald Blythe from the interviews which he recorded for his original book, and was spoken by a professional actor. But all the visible actors were local people rather than professionals, and their words were unscripted. They gave their services to the film freely at weekends, and brought to each session clothes, props, and food. They would simply be warned in advance what the scene was to be about, so that they could meet in the appropriate dress and frame of mind. The result is certainly a remarkable, if somewhat puzzling film. It has moments which are deeply moving just because they are so ordinary: like the funeral sequence, with its awkward silences, the inadequacy of words when they come, the too slowly sung hymn, and afterwards the bad jokes and stories told again and again. Here is a real pathos which professional acting would not dare to achieve. On the other hand, there are clearly unsolved problems in this approach to film making. Who is it for? To the middle-class film connoisseur the ungainly 'acting' was disconcerting, and the dialect accents hard to catch. Some local audiences, by contrast, were disturbed by the many inaccuracies in historical detail—hardly surprising, since the film was made in everyday modern settings. Others simply found the film boring, ordinary, and without any obvious point. They would have been more interested had the story itself been entertaining. Most of these criticisms derive from the same

fundamental difficulty. While the film may have been acted by local people, the essential direction remained in other hands. Neither its design, its plot, nor its message sprang from the collaboration which took place in its production. If there was a common purpose, it was one imposed from without.

Such a difficulty is not peculiar to film making, although it is certainly increased by the technical requirements and costs of the medium and its domination by an international professionalism. A similar problem applies especially in national broadcasting. And in practice it occurs in most other types of project, especially in education. But the co-operative nature of the oral history approach has led to a radical questioning of this one-sided process, and hence of the fundamental relationship between history and the community. Historical information need not be taken away from the community for interpretation and presentation by the professional historian. Through oral history the community can, and should, be given the confidence to write its own history. This hope has been behind some of the co-operative local oral history groups which have issued cheap cyclostyled broadsheets of transcribed extracts from recordings, adult education local history projects, or joint projects between oral historians and trade unionists.

The most radical model of this approach is provided by the People's Autobiography of Hackney. This arose from a group, originally connected with the W.E.A. (Workers' Educational Association), which met in a local book and community centre called Centreprise. Members of the group varied in age from their teens to their seventies, but all lived in or near Hackney in East London. Their occupations were very mixed. The group was an open one, brought together by notices in the local papers, libraries, and other places. Any member could record anyone else. At the group meetings they played and discussed their tapes—sometimes also recording these discussions—and planned ways of sharing what was collected with a Hackney audience. For this reason they especially emphasize publishing and have issued a series of cheap pamphlets, assisted by a local library sub-

sidy, based on transcriptions and written accounts of people's lives, which have had a large local circulation These pamphlets have in turn stimulated reactions from other people and led to more discussion and recordings The group has also collected photographs, and has sufficient material, through tapes and slides, for historical presentations to audiences in the community such as hospital patients and pensioners' associations—another way of giving back to people their own history, showing them it was valued, and stimulating their own contributions The People's Autobiography thus aims, on the one hand, to build up through a series of individual accounts a composite history of life and work in Hackney, and, on the other, to give people confidence in their own memories and interpretations of the past, their ability to contribute to the writing of history—confidence, too, in their own words in short, in themselves

The possibility of using history for such a constructive social and personal purpose comes from the intrinsic nature of the oral approach It is about individual lives—and any life is of interest And it depends upon speech, not upon the much more demanding and restricted skill of writing Moreover, the tape recorder not only allows history to be taken down in spoken words but also to be presented through them In a historical talk, or a museum demonstration of craft techniques, or a retrospective broadcast, the use of a human voice, fresh, personal, particular, always brings the past into the present with extraordinary immediacy The words may be idiosyncratically phrased, but all the more expressive for that They breathe life into history

Something more is to be learned from them than mere content Recordings demonstrate the rich ability of people of all walks of life to express themselves George Ewart Evans has shown in his many books how the dialect of the East Anglian farm labourer, long scorned by the county landowning class for his notable inarticulacy, carries a Chaucerian grammatical and expressive strength which is hard to equal in conventional English And this kind of discovery has been shared by oral historians wherever they have worked The tape recorder has allowed the speech of ordinary people

—their narrative skill for example—to be seriously understood for the first time. Educationists a few years ago, under the influence of Basil Bernstein, were assuming that working-class speech was a fatal handicap, a constraint which imprisoned all but the simplest types of thought. Now, with the help of tape recorders, the magazine *Language and Class Workshop* can challenge Bernstein's theories with its published transcripts; and in America 'urban folklore' has become an accepted literary genre. However, it may well be a long time before such revaluations reach general acceptance. Meanwhile, one of the key social contributions which can be made by the oral historian, whether in projects or through bringing direct quotation into written history, is to help give ordinary people confidence in their own speech.

In discovering such a purpose, oral historians have travelled a long way from their original aim—and there is, undoubtedly, some danger of conflict between the two. On the level of the interview itself, for example, there have been telling criticisms of a relationship with informants in which a middle-class professional determines who is to be interviewed and what is to be discussed and then disappears with a tape of somebody's life which he never hears about again—and if he did, might be indignant at the unintended meanings imposed on his words. There are clear social advantages in the contrasting ideal of a self-selected group, or an open public meeting, which focuses on equal discussion and encourages local publication of its results; and of individual recording sessions which are conversations rather than directed interviews. But there are also drawbacks in the alternative.

The self-selected group will rarely be fully representative of a community. It is much more likely to be composed from its central groups—people from a skilled working-class or lower middle-class background. The local upper class will rarely be there, nor will the very poor, the less confident especially among women, or the immigrant from its racial minority. A truer and socially more valuable form of local oral history will be created when these other groups are drawn in. Its publications will be much more telling if they

can juxtapose, for example, the mistress with the domestic servant, or a millowner with the millworkers It will then reveal the variety of social experience in the community, the groups which had the better or the worse of it—and perhaps lead to a consideration of what might be done about it Local history drawn from a more restricted social stratum tends to be more complacent, a re enactment of community myth This certainly needs to be recorded, and a self sufficient local group which can do this is undoubtedly helping many others besides itself But for the radical historian it is hardly sufficient History should not merely comfort, it should provide a challenge, and understanding which helps towards change For this the myth needs to become dynamic It has to encompass the complexities of conflict And for the historian who wishes to work and write as a socialist, the task must be not simply to celebrate the working class as it is, but to raise its consciousness There is no point in replacing a conservative myth of upper class wisdom with a lower-class one A history is required which leads to action not to confirm, but to change the world

In principle there is no reason why local projects should not have such an object, while at the same time continuing to encourage self confidence and the writing of history from within the community Most groups will normally contain some members with more historical experience They certainly need to use tact, to undervalue rather than emphasize their advantage But it is everybody's loss in the long run if they disown it their contribution should be to help the group towards a wider perspective Similar observations apply in the recording session where the essential need is mutual respect A superior, dominating attitude does not make for a good interview anyway The oral historian has to be a good listener, the informant an active helper As George Ewart Evans puts it—'although the old survivors were walking books, I could not just leaf them over They were persons' [2] And so are historians They have come for a purpose, to get information, and if ultimately ashamed of this they should not have come at all A historian who just engages in haphazard reminiscence will collect interesting

pieces of information, but will throw away the chance of winning the critical evidence for the structure of historical argument and interpretation.

The relationship between history and the community should not be one-sided in either direction: but rather a series of exchanges, a dialectic, between information and interpretation, between educationists and their localities, between classes and generations. There will be room for many kinds of oral history and it will have many different social consequences. But at bottom they are all related.

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people. It encourages teachers and students to become fellow-workers. It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact—and thence understanding—between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short, it makes for fuller human beings. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history.

2

Historians and Oral History

THE term 'oral history' is new, like the tape recorder, and it has radical implications for the future. But this does not mean that it has no past. In fact, oral history is as old as history itself. It was the *first* kind of history. And it is only quite recently that skill in handling oral evidence has ceased to be one of the marks of the great historian. When the leading professional historian of mid nineteenth century France, Jules Michelet, professor of the École Normale, the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, and chief historical curator of the National Archives, came to write his *History of the French Revolution* (1847–53), he assumed that written documents should be but one source among many. He could draw on his own memory: he had been born in Paris in 1798, within a decade of the fall of the Bastille. But for ten years he had also been systematically collecting oral evidence outside Paris. His intention was to counterbalance the evidence of official documents with the political judgement of popular oral tradition.

> When I say *oral* tradition, I mean *national* tradition, which remained generally scattered in the mouths of the people, which everybody said and repeated, peasants, townsfolk, old men, women, even children, which you can hear if you enter of an evening into a village tavern, which you may gather if, finding on the road a passer by at rest, you begin to converse with him about the rain, the season, then the high price of victuals, then the times of the Emperor, then the times of the Revolution.[1]

Michelet was clearly skilled at listening, and drawing an informant out. He also had distinct ideas about [illegible] areas in which oral evidence was more, or less, [illegible]

in his own time he was exceptional; but he was certainly not peculiar. Yet within a century the historical profession had so far turned its back on its own traditional skills, that Professor James Westfall Thompson commented on Michelet's passage, in his monumental *History of Historical Writing* (1942), 'this may seem like a strange way of collecting historical data'. How did this reversal come about? What were the stages by which oral history lost its original eminence?

One of the underlying reasons becomes clear as soon as we look at the scope of oral tradition in pre-literate societies. At this stage all history was oral history. But everything else had to be remembered too: crafts and skills, the time and season, the sky, territory, law, speeches, transactions, bargains. And oral tradition itself was very varied. Jan Vansina in his classic *Oral Tradition; a study in historical methodology* (1965), divides African oral tradition into five categories. First there are formulas—learning formulas, rituals, slogans, and titles. Next there are lists of place names and personal names. Then come official and private poetry—historical, religious, or personal. Fourthly there are stories—historical, didactic, artistic, or personal. Lastly there are legal and other commentaries. Not all of these can be found in all African societies. Official poetry and historical stories, for example, arise only with a relatively high degree of political organization. Nevertheless, in most societies there is normally a considerable range of oral evidence. The social importance of some of these oral traditions also resulted in reliable systems for handing them down from generation to generation with a minimum of distortion. Practices such as group testimony on ritual occasions, disputations, schools for teaching traditional lore, and recitations on taking office, could preserve exact tests through the centuries, including archaisms even after they had ceased to be understood. Traditions of this type resemble legal documents, or sacred books, and their bearers become in many African courts highly specialized officials. In Rwanda, for example, genealogists, memorialists, rhapsodists, and *abiiru* were each responsible for the preservation of different types of tradition. The genealogists, *abacurabwenge*, had to remember the lists

of kings and queen mothers, the memoralists, *abateekerezi*, the most important events of the various reigns, the rhapsodists, *abasizi*, preserved the panegyrics on the kings, and the *abiiru* the secrets of the dynasty

There were also village tradition bearers, who, more often than the court specialists, have continued to hand down traditions into the present A dramatic encounter with one has been described by Alex Haley in his account of the rediscovery of his own ancestry—subsequently given great publicity in the semi fictionalized form of *Roots* (1976) His family had a tradition rare among black Americans—of how their first ancestor came to the colonies as a slave, including a few details how he had been captured when chopping wood, his African name had been Kin-tay, he called a guitar a 'ko' and a river 'Kamby Bolongo', how he had landed at 'Naplis' and worked with the English name Toby for Mas' William Waller For this black family descent in America itself, Haley was able to provide proof from archival researches, down to an advertisement in the *Maryland Gazette* of October 1767 for 'fresh slaves for sale' of the *Lord Ligonier* and a transfer deed between the brothers John and William Waller of 'one Negro man slave called Toby' But all this followed the high moment of his search, back across the Atlantic—a moment in which it now seems enthusiasm may have gone further than the evidence warranted His ancestor's language had been identified as Mandinka and 'Kamby Bolongo' as the Gambia River, and then, in Gambia, he found that there was an old family clan called Kinte So far so good Then after a search, a tradition-bearer of the clan, or 'griot', was located in a tiny, distant hamlet in the interior Accompanied by interpreters and musicians, Alex Haley eventually reached him 'And from a distance I could see this small man with a pillbox hat and an off-white robe, and even from a distance there was an air of "somebodiness' about him' The people gathered around Alex Haley in a horseshoe to stare at the first black American they had seen And then they turned to the old man

The old man, the *griot*, the oral historian, Kebba Kanga Fofana, 73 rains of age, began now to tell me the ancestral history of the Kinte

clan as it had been told down across the centuries, from the times of the forefathers. It was as if a scroll was being read. It wasn't just talk as we talk. It was a very formal occasion. The people became mouse quiet, rigid. The old man sat in a chair and when he would speak he would come up forward, his body would grow rigid, the cords in his neck stood out and he spoke words as though they were physical objects coming out of his mouth. He'd speak a sentence or so, he would go limp, relax, and the translation would come. Out of this man's head came spilling lineage details incredible to behold. Two, three centuries back. Who married whom, who had what children, what children married whom and their children, and so forth, just unbelievable. I was struck not only by the profusion of details, but also by the biblical pattern of the way they expressed it. It would be something like: 'and so and so took as a wife so and so and begat and begat and begat', and he'd name their mates and their children, and so forth. When they would date things it was not with calendar dates, but they would date things with physical events, such as ... a flood.

So step by step the old man recounted the history of the Kinte clan: how they had come out of Old Mali, had been blacksmiths, potters, and weavers, had settled in the present village, until, roughly between 1750 and 1760, a younger son of the family, Omoro Kinte, took a wife, Binta Kebba, by whom he had four sons, whose names were Kunta, Lamin, Suwadu, and Madi.

By the time he got down to that level of the family, the *griot* had talked for probably five hours. He had stopped maybe fifty times in the course of that narrative ... And then a translation came as all the others had come, calmly, and it began, 'About the time the king's soldiers came'. That was one of those time-fixing references. Later in England, in British Parliamentary records, I went feverishly searching to find out what he was talking about, because I had to have the calendar date. But now in back country Africa, the *griot* Kebba Kanga Fofana, the oral historian, was telling the story as it had come down for centuries from the time of the forefathers of the Kinte clan. 'About the time the king's soldiers came, the eldest of these four sons, Kunta, went away from this village to chop wood and was seen never again.' And he went on with his story. I sat there as if I was carved of rock ...

Alex Haley did, after a few moments, pull out his own notebook, and show the interpreters that this was the same story that he had himself heard as a child from his grandmother on the front porch of her house in Tennessee, and there then followed a spontaneous ceremony of reconciliation with his own people, in which he laid hands on their infants, and they took him into their mosque and prayed in Arabic, 'Praise be to Allah for one long lost from us whom Allah has returned.'[2]

For a number of reasons, the identification of Kinte is much more doubtful than Alex Haley believed in that moment. His 'griot', who lacked the full traditional training, was not an ideal tradition-bearer, but like a good 'griot' was searching the genealogical store in his mind for the evidence needed for an audience—and he may have had an idea in advance of what Haley wanted. Subsequently, there have been variations in minor detail when he has repeated his testimony. More important, the African and American generations fit awkwardly—although this could be due to a telescoping not uncommon in oral tradition—and the time-fixing reference is very weak for an area in which European soldiers had been present for a long time. For instances of the accuracy of oral tradition in non literate societies, we must look elsewhere: for example, to ancient Greece, where the accuracy of description of details of obsolete armour and name-lists of abandoned cities, preserved orally for six hundred years before the first written versions of the *Iliad* were circulated, has been vindicated by classical scholarship and archaeology.

Nevertheless, Haley's story does bring home with rare power the *standing* of the oral historian before the spread of documentation in literate societies made redundant such public moments of historical revelation. The modern genealogist works in private silence in a record office. Memory is demoted from the status of public authority to that of a private aid. People still remember rituals, names, songs, stories, skills, but it is now the document which stands as the final authority, and the guarantee of transmission to the future. Consequently, it is just those public and long term

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oral traditions, which were once the most prestigious, which have proved most vulnerable. By contrast, personal reminiscence and private family traditions, which are rarely committed to paper just because most people do not think them of much importance to others, have become the standard type of oral evidence. And it is normally only among social groups of low prestige, such as children, the urban poor, or isolated country people, that other oral traditions such as games, songs, ballads, and historical stories are now collected. This change in the social function and status of the bearers of oral traditions is clearly related to its long-term decline in prestige—and, conversely, to its current radicality.

In Western Europe it came about very slowly. The first written histories probably go back three thousand years. They set down existing oral tradition about the distant past and gradually also began to chronicle the present. From quite an early stage there were a few outstanding historical writers who tried to evaluate their evidence. The method of Herodotus, for example, in the fifth century B.C. was to seek out eyewitnesses and cross-question them. By the third century A.D. we can find Lucian advising the would-be historian to look for his informant's motives; while Herodian cites enough of his sources to suggest the order in which he rates them—antiquarian authorities, palace information, letters, senate proceedings, and other witnesses. And in the early eighth century Bede, in the preface to his *History of the English Church and People*, carefully distinguished his sources. For most of the English provinces he had to rely on oral traditions sent to him by other clergy, but he was able to draw on the records at Canterbury, and he even secured copies of letters from the papal archives through a London priest who visited Rome. But he was surest of the evidence for his own Northumbria, where 'I am not dependent on any one author, but on countless faithful *witnesses* who either know or remember the facts, apart from what I know myself'.[3]

Bede's attitude to evidence, and his assumption that he could be most trusted where he had been able to collect oral evidence from eyewitnesses himself, would have been shared by all the most critical historians into the eighteenth century

—not to mention the many less meticulous chroniclers and hagiographers who stood between them Neither the spread of printing, nor the secular rationality of the Renaissance, brought any changes in this way This is perhaps less surprising when it is realized that the typical scholar *heard*, rather than himself *read*, the printed books which became available The best known historians remained in fact rather less careful than Bede Guiccardini in sixteenth-century Italy, for example, avoids the direct quotation of documents, and assumes his own participation in the times he describes is a sufficient guarantee of truth Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England* (1704) carries a similar tone, although he does occasionally refer to reminiscence, and he did trouble to look at the journals of the House of Commons for the ten years when he was not a Member Bishop Burnet s *History of His Own Time* (1724) is less magisterial, but again assumes the prime value of oral evidence, which he handles with a notable care He cites the authors of his stories regularly, and when his witnesses disagree he sets them against each other Printed authorities, by contrast, he assumes to be inferior 'I leave all common transactions to ordinary books If at any time I say things that occur in any books, it is partly to keep the thread of the narration in an unentangled method '[4]

It is perhaps more surprising to find little immediate change, at least in the attitude to evidence for recent history, amongst the historians of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment Voltaire was certainly cynical enough about the 'absurd' myths of oral tradition from the remote past, recited from generation to generation, which had been the original 'foundations of history' indeed, the remoter their origin, the less their value, for 'they lose a degree of probability at every successive transmission' He rejoiced that 'omens, prodigies, and apparitions are now being sent back to the regions of fable History stood in need of being enlightened by philosophy' From modern historians he demanded 'more details, better ascertained facts' But although for his own works he collected both oral and documentary evidence, he rarely cited his sources and

comments suggest a lack of distinction between them. He boasted in his *History of Charles XII* (1731), for example, that he had 'not ventured to advance a single fact, without consulting eyewitnesses of undoubted veracity'. After its publication, he cited as an indication of his reliability a letter of approval from the king of Poland, who 'himself had been an eyewitness' of some of the events described. He also defended his failure to cite authorities in *The Age of Louis XIV* (1751) on the ground that 'the events of the first years, being known to every one, wanted only to be placed in their proper light; and as to those of a later date, the author speaks of them as eyewitness'. By contrast he did feel a need in his *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great* (1759–63) to name, at least at the start, 'his vouchers, the principal of which is Peter the Great himself'.[5] For this work he had the assistance of documents selected and copied by the Russian officials and sent to his home in Geneva. Voltaire, while retaining a special regard for personal witness, reveals curiously little awareness of the possible bias either in a monarch's own judgement of his reign, or in a set of documents preserved and even selected by the royal officials themselves.

Voltaire stood, however, at the edge of a period of great change in the nature of historical scholarship. Behind it lay the cumulative effects of two centuries of printing: an explosion in historical resources which was both quantitative and qualitative. We may take, for an example, *A New Method of Studying History: recommending more easy and complete instructions for improvements in that science*, published by Langlet du Fresnoy, librarian to the Prince of Savoy, in 1713, and subsequently translated into Dutch, German, and English. As it happens there is nothing very new in the method itself which Fresnoy puts forward—he even asserts that those historians who combine 'hard study, and a great experience of affairs', are considerably superior to those 'that shut themselves up in their closets to examine there, upon the credit of others, the facts which themselves were not able to be informed of'.[6] Much more remarkable is his second volume, for it consists entirely of bibliography, listing altogether some 10,000 titles of historical works in the major European

languages. The production of such a list indicates a substantial community of scholars. It also shows the development of basic professional resources. An English historian, for example, could now make use of a series of county and local histories, biographies and biographical collections, and travellers' accounts. Printed sets of church inscriptions, manuscript chronicles, and medieval public rolls were being published. In Bishop William Nicolson's *English Historical Library* he had available a critical bibliography. The apparatus for writing history from the closet was being assembled: it was becoming possible for some historians at least to dispense with their own field-work, and rely on documents and oral evidence published by others.

Nevertheless, the immediate effect of the immense expansion of printed sources which continued through the eighteenth century was a positive enrichment of historical writing. Voltaire could reasonably insist that a good modern historian pay 'more attention to customs, laws, mores, commerce, finance, agriculture, population. It is with history as it is with mathematics and physics. The scope has increased prodigiously.'[7] One can see the long-term impact of change particularly well in Macaulay, whose *History of England* (1848–55) was in terms of sales probably the most popular nineteenth-century history book in the English language. As a practising politician, and a master of style, Macaulay might be seen as an heir to Guiccardini and Clarendon. But perhaps the most brilliant passages of his book are those in which he gives the social background, from the way of life of the country squire to the condition of the urban and rural poor. He uses as his raw materials contemporary surveys, poetry and novels, diaries, and published reminiscences. He also makes particularly interesting use of oral tradition. In stories of the highwaymen who 'held an aristocratical position in the community of thieves', anecdotes 'of their ferocity and audacity, of their occasional acts of generosity and good nature, of their amours, of their miraculous escapes . . . there is doubtless a large mixture of fable; but they are not on that account unworthy of being recorded; for it is both an authentic and an impo

that such tales, whether false or true, were heard by our ancestors with eagerness and faith'. He quotes at length a broadside street ballad which he calls 'the vehement and bitter cry of labour against capital', and argues that evidence of this kind must be used for social history. 'The common people of that age were not in the habit of meeting for public discussion, or haranguing, or of petitioning parliament. No newspaper pleaded their cause. . . . A great part of their history is to be learned only from ballads.'[8]

As a general historian, Macaulay drew not simply on a wider range of published sources, but also on the development of a whole series of other modes of historical writing. One of the authorities he cited in using oral tradition was Sir Walter Scott. As a young man, before he began writing novels, Scott was a Border Country lawyer, and one of his first publications was a *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802), a set of popular ballads which he had collected from country people with his friend Robert Shortreed. His own interest had in turn been partly awakened by a still earlier collection, Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). But he could have chanced on others. Perhaps best known was William Camden's *Britannia* (1586), which includes chapters on the development of the English language, proverbs, and names as well as poetry. It is one of the founding works of the historical study of language and folklore.

Scott went on to make a still more important contribution to a second new form of historical writing, the historical novel. Here again he collected much of the oral evidence which he needed himself. He visited the Highlands, 'talking to Jacobites who had taken part in the '45 Rebellion'. Scott recognized through conversing with these old men—perhaps better than anyone then living—what had really happened as a result of the '45. Culloden saw the end of a culture: the dispersal or the destruction of the Highland clans, a tribal society, and a way of life that had lasted in unbroken continuity since the Iron Age. The old men he talked to were truly historical documents; and contact with them undoubtedly helped to give his writing that veracity which informs his eariier novels like *Waverley*, *The Antiquary*, *Rob Roy*, and

Guy Mannering.[9] It was to honour his sources as much as to chaff himself that he prefaced some of his novels with Robert Burns' warning lines

> A chiel's amang you takin' notes
> An' faith he'll prent it.

Both as a note taker, and in the form of the historical novel itself, Scott set the pattern for some of the major imaginative works on the nineteenth century. Dickens, for example, deliberately set many of his novels in the London world which he could remember from childhood, and when he could not draw easily on oral memory, as for *Hard Times*, set out for special field work. Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* draws much of its drama from her knowledge of local memories of the Luddite rising. George Moore's life story of a domestic servant, *Esther Waters*, owes its realism to his habitual chatting below stairs in country houses, and elsewhere George Borrow came to understand the East Anglian gypsies in a similar way. In France, the work of Emile Zola sought the material for *Germinal* from his talks with the miners of Mons. Later on in Britain, Arnold Bennett was another great note taker, and his *Clayhanger* was again a reconstruction of a remembered world. Closer still to Scott was Thomas Hardy, with his shrewd observation of traditional country customs, and ability to use them as illustrations of conflict and change within the whole social structure. But this is looking ahead—and to a stage when, to their own loss, historians were less prepared to learn from novelists.

A third type of historical work which had expanded especially fast from the end of the seventeenth century was the biographical memoir. In this the use of oral evidence remained, of course, an assumed method. The growing popularity of memoirs brought interesting extensions in scope. First, there were a number of projects for collections of biographies which aimed to represent whole social groups, rather than simply exceptional individuals. The most famous of these projects, John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, although known in his lifetime, was not in fact published until two centuries later, in 1898. Aubrey, who wrote that from boyhood 'he did ever love to converse with old men, as Living

Histories', was an impoverished country gentleman, forced to turn his hobby into a living as an antiquarian research assistant working for others.[10] In the course of this he found time to put together stories and information from innumerable sources to compose a biographical portrait of his social circle, the seventeenth-century intelligentsia, as a whole. A more obscure example on a local level was Richard Gough's *Human Nature Displayed in the History of Myddle* (1833), in Shropshire, which had been written in 1700–6, and has recently attracted the interest of historians. In his preface to its republication W. G. Hoskins calls it 'a unique book. It gives us a picture of seventeenth-century England in all its wonderful and varied detail such as no other book that I know even remotely approaches.' Gough started by discussing the buildings of the parish; but once he reached the parish church he used its pews as the framework for a social survey, taking each pew-holding family in turn, discussing their origins and their occupations, and relating with relish either their successes, or their failings—drink, bribery, and whoring. This information, moreover, is not merely illustrative; for its value has also emerged, in a modern historical study, in establishing basic demographic facts, and correcting the misinterpretations which would otherwise have been made from more conventional sources such as wills and registers.[11] In the frankness with which he documented scandal, Gough is perhaps unique; but his focus on people rather than institutions provides one of the first instances of a valuable minority form of local history. A later example is the *History and Traditions of Darwen and its People* which J. G. Shaw, the editor of a local newspaper, recorded in shorthand and published from an old man in the town in 1889.

Another parallel extension led to the development of individual working-class autobiographies. There are several different sources for this. One is the life published as a moral example. Apart from explicit stories of conversion and rescue, like the testimonies of early Methodists, a number of mid-nineteenth-century lives were edited by Christian pamphleteers, introduced by parsons or given titles like *The Working Man's Way in the World.* Morality was secularized by

Samuel Smiles, who published biographical collections of engineers, ironworkers, and toolmakers as well as his classic, *Self-Help: with Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (1859). One of the first true working-class autobiographies was that of the self-improving tailor Thomas Carter, published by the moral and educational popularizer Charles Knight in 1845 in much the same spirit. Quite a different vein was represented by the memoir of picaresque adventure. In the eighteenth century this normally implied gambling or sexual intrigue, but it could be extended into other forms of 'low life', and poachers' autobiographies later carried some of the same flavour. There was a convergence of these two autobiographical approaches in the mid-nineteenth century, as the working classes made their political presence felt, and came to be seen as a problem. The semi-autobiographical works of the journeyman engineer, Thomas Wright—*Some Habits and Customs of the Working Classes* (1867), *The Great Unwashed* (1868), and *Our New Masters* (1873)—provided information for the middle class which was comforting as well as colourful. There are signs too of a concern in some authors to retain something of the liveliness of working speech forms in print. And at the same time the working-class movement itself began to produce autobiography, with *The Life and Struggles of William Lovett* (1876) and *The Life of Thomas Cooper* (1872)—former Chartist reconverted to Methodist preacher—leading the way; although the labour political biography eventually settled into a rather narrow form. The early emergence of working-class autobiography in Britain can therefore be linked closely to working-class activity, first in religion and then in politics. The same is true rather later on in France. It is striking that by contrast in Germany no tradition either of the social novel or of working-class autobiography was established in the nineteenth century. Only in 1904 did the socialist deputy in the Reichstag, Paul Göhre, launch the first series of autobiographies with the deliberate intention of revealing to middle-class readers both the conditions of ordinary life, and that working-class people shared 'human thoughts and feelings, and reacted to joy and suffering in the same way they did'.[12]

Lastly, among the new forms of historical writing can be seen, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the beginnings of an independent social history. At this stage there was no professional separation between the processes of creating information, constructing social theory and historical analysis, so that they proceed sometimes together, sometimes apart. One cannot, as a result, separate the origins of an 'oral history' method from general developments in the collection and use of oral evidence. Two of the earliest achievements, for example, came from Scotland. In 1781 John Millar published his *Origin of the Distinctions of Ranks*, which puts forward a historical and comparative theory of inequality. He not merely anticipated Marx by linking the stages in master-servant relationships with changes in economic organization, but produced in his discussion 'of the rank and condition of women in different ages' one of the first historical explanations of sexual inequality. This pioneering exercise in historical sociology depended on a wide variety of published sources from ancient histories to the recent descriptions of local social customs by European travellers in other continents. Ten years later came a major step in the creation of source material, the first *Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791–9), a national collection of contemporary and historical social information carried out through the parish clergy and edited by Sir John Sinclair. There had been no investigation on a comparable scale in the British Isles since Domesday. Meanwhile, in England, one important model of social investigation was provided by the 'field-work' travels of Arthur Young, bringing together both his own observations and interviews with others in his influential reports on the state of British agriculture. William Cobbett's later travels, documenting the often devastating social consequences of economic progress in agriculture, used the same method in reply to Young. Others, less energetic, devised short-cuts which were to prove key methodological devices for the future. The first questionnaire has been attributed to David Davies, a Berkshire rector, who was investigating farm labourers' budgets, and sent out printed abstracts to potential collaborators, whom he hoped might

collect similar information in other places. And it was for another investigation of *The State of the Poor*, again in the 1790s, that Sir Frederick Eden sent out one of the first modern interviewers: 'a remarkably faithful and intelligent person; who had spent more than a year in travelling from place to place, for the express purpose of obtaining exact information, agreeably to a set of queries with which I furnished him.'13

The nineteenth century was to see this process of development in field-work method, historical analysis, and social theory carried rapidly forward—but in a context of increasing separation and specialization. This was even true within field-work methodology itself. The travelling investigation, for example, become a field-work specialism of the anthropologist, and the survey of the sociologist of 'modern' societies. And sharp differences emerged even between the form of survey method used in different European countries. In France, Belgium, and Germany, as well as in Britain, the survey was first used by independent philanthropists, medical reformers, and sometimes newspapers, and then taken up for official government investigations. But when the French began their first large-scale 'enquête ouvrière' under fear of the revolutionary uprisings of 1848, they did not seek evidence directly, but through their well-organized local bureaucracy. And the German social surveys which were begun in the 1870s were invariably sent out to local officials, clergy, teachers, or landowners, for return in essay form, following the model of the French and Belgian 'enquêtes'. In Britain, by contrast, techniques for the direct collection of evidence were adopted. This began regularly with the launching in 1801 of the decennial census, carried out under central instructions by investigators dispersed throughout the country—thus establishing the national interview survey. Only the sum findings of the census were published. But the parliamentary social inquiries and Royal Commissions which increasingly came to be published as Blue books were also commonly conducted through interviewing, although of a different kind. Sometimes an on-the-spot invest tio made, but normally witnesses were summo s

inquiring committee and questioned by them. The exchanges and arguments between the committee and witnesses were often reproduced along with the publication of the official report. They constitute a rich repository of autobiographical and other oral evidence. And their potential as source material was quickly realized. The Blue books were the basis of Disraeli's descriptions of working-class life in *Coningsby* and *Sybil*. And they proved equally useful to Karl Marx.

Marx and Engels, in their more immediate political writings, normally drew substantially both on direct experience of their own, and on reports, written and oral, from their innumerable correspondents and visitors. Equally, Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* combines material from newspapers, Blue books, and other contemporary comment with his own eyewitness accounts of working-class life. Engels had come to Manchester in 1842 to work in the English branch of his father's firm, and in his spare hours from the cotton mill was able to explore the industrial conditions of the city and to meet, with the help of a working-class girl, Mary Burns, some of the Chartist leaders. For his culminating theoretical analysis, however, Marx relied on published source material. *Capital* is heavily documented with both bibliography and footnotes. Apart from occasional quotations from classical literature, Marx cites two types of source: contemporary economic and political theory and comment; and contemporary description, often including vivid anecdotes, from newspapers and from the parliamentary Blue books. No doubt this decision of Marx to use only already published oral material, rather than carry out any new field-work, was partly due to personal taste, and partly to enable him to buttress his arguments with unassailable authorities. But given the influence which *Capital* was to have on the future of social history, it set a key precedent.

It is equally significant of the changing situation that such a choice was open to Marx. For we have still not exhausted the major new steps in the creation of oral source material for social history. In addition to the investigations of the

government, social survey work was undertaken by voluntary bodies By the late 1830s there were Statistical Societies in London, Manchester, and other cities, composed mainly of doctors, prosperous businessmen, and other professionals, which made important contributions to the techniques of collecting and analysing social information They carried out local inquiries into working class conditions, making pioneer use of the door-to-door questionnaire survey, and publishing their findings in statistical tables prefaced by a brief report In this form most of the original interview evidence was suppressed On the other hand, an alternative model was created by the newspaper investigation, which was developed in the 1840s, and culminated in the *Morning Chronicle* survey under Henry Mayhew Thus inquiry, conceived in the wake of the great cholera epidemic of 1849 has been called 'the first empirical survey into poverty *as such*' 14 Mayhew s aim was to demonstrate the relationship between industrial wage levels and social conditions Instead of a door to-door survey he therefore analysed a series of trades through a strategic sample In each trade he looked for representative workers at each job level, and then took supplementary information from unusually well paid workers at one extreme and distressed casual workers at the other He obtained his information both from correspondence and by direct interview, and for both he gradually developed a detailed schedule of questions Most striking was his actual interview technique He seems to have felt a respect for his informants which was very rare among investigators of his time His comments show both emotional sympathy and a willingness to listen to their views Indeed, his changing standpoint shows that he was genuinely prepared to be influenced by them No doubt this attitude helped him to be accepted into working class family homes and receive their life stories and feelings And, significantly, it was linked to an unusual concern with their exact words He normally went to interviews accompanied by a stenographer, so that everything said could be directly recorded in shorthand And in his reports he gave very substantial space to direct quotation In Mayhew's pages, as nowhere else, one

ordinary people of mid-Victorian England speaking. It is because of this that they continue to be read.

Despite his popularity, Mayhew had no direct successors. But with the rise of the socialist movement in the late nineteenth century, a new concern to understand both the conditions and spirit of the working classes was felt both in Britain and in Germany. One result was the 'settlement' movement, which encouraged idealistic middle-class men and women to live among the poor, sometimes in groups as voluntary workers, but also alone, and even in disguise. In England, for example, a number of 'glimpses into the abyss' inside common lodging-houses and workhouses were written besides the famous accounts of Jack London and, later, George Orwell. In Germany in 1890 Paul Göhre, as a young theology student, worked incognito in a Chemnitz machine tool factory to produce *Three Months in a Workshop* (1895): a study of factory culture which marked a turning-point in German social inquiry—as well as setting Göhre on the path which later led him, as we have seen, to launch the first German working-class autobiographies. Robert Sherard also used clandestine techniques for his vivid accounts of industrial conditions in *The White Slaves of England* (1897): 'the factories I visited were visited by me as a trespasser, and at a trespasser's risk'. He generally avoided contact with employers, finding that they just laughed at his 'stories of grievances' in their 'luxurious smoking-rooms'. A similar direct understanding of working-class culture was openly sought by Alexander Paterson, whose *Across the Bridges* (1911) is based on his years living in South London. In rural studies it is expressed in the respect for country people of George Sturt's *Change in the Village* (1912), and still more in Stephen Reynolds' books on the Devon fisher-people with whom he shared a house, *A Poor Man's House* (1909) and *Seems So!* (1913). Reynolds' sympathy was carried to an explicit 'repudiation of middle-class life' in the belief that the simpler lives of the poor were fundamentally 'better than the lives of the sort of people I was brought up among'.[15] Few, of course, would have gone this far. But something of the new sympathy and understanding can be found even in the most

formidable and influential of late nineteenth-century English social investigations, Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People in London* (1889–1903). Booth used a variety of methods, including participant observation, taking lodgings incognito in a working-class household, although for his main survey of poverty he did not use direct interviews, but relied on reports from school visitors. He took a great deal of oral evidence for his religious inquiry, but this was chiefly from clergy. For all its richness, his seventeen-volume masterpiece thus lacks the immediacy of working-class speech. Seebohm Rowntree, in developing Booth's method for his own study of York, *Poverty* (1901), did undertake direct interviewing, although his report was in the statistical tradition, avoiding quotation. But his later *Unemployment* (1911) uses direct quotations from interviewers' notes very effectively, and although this remains well short of Mayhew's standard, it provided an important early instance of the twentieth-century sociological survey, with its combination of tables and interview quotations. Another less well-known pioneering work is the cultural study of *The Equipment of the Workers* (1919), carried out by a high-minded adult education group at the St. Philip's Settlement in Sheffield, using both a quantitative sample frame and a selected number of deeper qualitative interviews incorporating life histories. It is an odd book, but again an example of a method which might have been—although in the event was not—taken up at this time by historians.

A second line of influence from Booth's social survey leads more directly into history. One of his team of investigators was the young Beatrice Webb. Her contributions on dock labour and the sweated tailoring trade are the best industrial analyses in Booth's whole series. She also had early experience in door-to-door interrogation as a rent collector for Octavia Hill. Thus when she came to write her first independent historical study, *The Co-operative Movement in Britain* (1891), and later, with Sidney Webb, in their classic *History of Trade Unionism* (1894), she undertook the collection of oral, along with documentary, evidence in a highly systematic way. From the start, Beatrice combined searches

records with visits to Co-operative Societies and interviews with leading Co-operative personalities. Later she evolved with Sidney a method of occasional intensive field-work forays, setting up headquarters in lodgings in a provincial town for two or three weeks, and 'working hard; looking through minute books, interviewing and attending business meetings of trade unions'. Although at first Sidney preferred documentary work, being 'shy in cross-examining officials, who generally begin by being unwilling witnesses and need gentle but firm handling', they apparently hit upon a 'devastating technique of joint interview, in which they battered from either side the object of their attentions—sometimes a political opponent, sometimes an official who had not devoted much thought to the underlying implications of his official actions—with a steady left–right of question, argument, assertion, and contradiction, and left him converted, bewildered, or indignant, as the case might be'.[16] Later on Beatrice put these and other less dubious interviewing skills to effect in deliberately creating the evidence she wanted before the 1905 Poor Law Commission, both through procuring and briefing witnesses, and through her own cross-examining.

In their published histories, the Webbs cited only documentary sources. But they depended heavily on their interviewing both for their overall interpretation and for their treatment of facts. Each field-work visit resulted in an overall assessment of a particular organization, and a set of penetrating portraits of its personalities. The Webbs were careful to pass on their method to the school of British labour history of which they were the founders. Page Arnot, for example, followed it for his histories of the miners' trade unions. The notes on interviewing which Beatrice Webb published in *My Apprenticeship* (1926) still command respect. And it must surely be her example which inspired the leading economic historian, J. H. Clapham, in 1906, to make a remarkably early plea for the oral history method, arguing for the training of interviewers to collect 'the memories of businessmen' which were, in his view, 'the best original authorities' for recent economic history: and 'with them

often die some of the most valuable records of nineteenth-century history'[17]

Clapham's call went unanswered And in general the development of the social survey, first in Britain and subsequently in other countries, is for the oral historian as much a story of neglected opportunity as of pioneering There were, however, a few notable experiments in the use of oral material by historians themselves In America, for example, in the 1860s, H H Bancroft, whose family firm were the largest booksellers, stationers, and publishers in the far west, decided to collect material on a very large scale for his historical studies of the recently colonized Pacific coast of California Over a period of fifty years he employed altogether six hundred assistants, who built up, indexed, and abstracted his library In addition to buying all the documents he could find and sending his agents to harass financially embarrassed families and corporations, he mobilized a whole army of reporters to extract conversations from surviving witnesses Perhaps the most skilled of these was the Spanish speaking Enrique Cerruti Bancroft himself claimed that his library included 'two hundred volumes of original narratives from memory by as many early Californians, native and pioneer, written by themselves or taken down from their lips   There were a thousand, five thousand witnesses to the early history of this coast yet living, whom, as before intimated, Mr Bancroft resolved to see and question, all of them possible, and a thousand he did see, and a thousand his assistants saw, and wrote down from their own mouths the vivid narratives of their experiences'[18] Bancroft's methods clearly had many weaknesses, and he proved unable to write up the material he collected in a convincing enough form But in his willingness to use oral evidence, he set a precedent which was subsequently followed both in serious scholarship and in popular local journalism Frederick Jackson Turner partly reached his famous thesis on the significance of the open frontier in this way Similarly, from the 1920s it was a regular policy of the Arizona *Republican* to collect stories for publication from 'old timers' at annually organized pioneers' reunions and certainly, Bancroft himself

had been able, through his own private wealth, to organize one of the most elaborate purely historical research enterprises of the nineteenth century, anticipating some of the giant public and privately funded projects of a hundred years later.

It may perhaps be a salutary warning that although his library now forms the centre of the great Berkeley university campus, as a historian Bancroft is now largely forgotten. In this he stands in sharp contrast to another pioneer of oral history, the French historian Jules Michelet. Michelet is rightly remembered; and more needs to be said at this point about his use of oral evidence. He is a remarkable figure: both the leading professional of his age, and a great popular historian; and as imaginative in seeing the possibilities of documentary archives, as of oral tradition. Besides this he was one of the first historians to bring an understanding of the land and landscape into his writing. His influence was diffuse. One can see it in W. G. Hoskins, following *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) along the hedgerows; or in France, the great medievalist Marc Bloch combining his searches in archives with the study of field patterns, place names, and folklore, tramping round the French countryside talking with a peasantry who in the early twentieth century still worked the land with some of the means and spirit of their medieval predecessors. Michelet himself used oral evidence, especially in his *History of the French Revolution*, where he realized that the official documents preserved only one side of the political story. In 1846 he had also published *Le Peuple*, a remarkable essay on the impact of mechanization on the social classes of France. Its preface contains a striking—indeed passionate—statement of how he came to his method, and gained from it. He had been collecting information outside Paris for ten years, starting with Lyons, and then moving to other provincial towns, and into the countryside. 'My inquiry among *living* documents', he wrote, 'taught me many things that are not in our statistics . . . The mass of new information I have thus acquired, and which is not in any book, would scarcely be credited.' This was how he had first noticed the immense increase in

the use of linen articles by poor families, and from this deduced an important shift within the structure of the family itself:

> This fact, important in itself as an advance in cleanliness . . . proves an increasing stability in households and families—above all the influence of woman, who, gaining little by her own means, can only make this outlay by appropriating part of the wages of the husband. Woman, in these households, is economy, order, and providence . . . This was a useful indication of the insufficiency of the documents gathered from statistics and other works of political economy, for comprehending the people; such documents offer partial, artificial results, views taken at a sharp angle, which may be wrongly interpreted.

Michelet felt exceptionally at ease with this kind of research. This was partly because of his early life in a Parisian printer's family. Interviewing brought him back close to his own social origins, from which he had been separated through his education. 'I have made this book of *myself*, of my life, and of my heart. It is the fruit of my experience . . . I have derived it from my own observation, and my intercourse with friends and neighbours; I have gleaned it from the highway.' He seems to have been considerably happier talking to poor people than he was with the social class into which he had risen:

> Next to the conversation of men of genius and profound erudition, that of the people is certainly the most instructive. If one be not able to converse with Beranger, Lamennais, or Lamartine, we must go into the fields and chat with a peasant. What is to be learnt from the middle class? As to the *salons*, I never left them without finding my heart shrunk and chilled . . .

Even so, it had been far from easy for Michelet to reach an open recognition of such feeling. As a young man, competitive, moving upwards through education, he had become intensely withdrawn. 'The fierce trial at college had altered my character—had made me reserved and close, shy and distrustful . . . I desired less and less the society of men.' His

rediscovery of others and of himself came through his teaching at the École Normale:

Those young people, amiable and confiding, who believed in me, reconciled me to mankind ...

The lonely writer plunged again into the crowd, listened to their noise, and noted their words. They were perfectly the same people ...

(My pupils) had done me, without knowing it, an immense service. If I had, as a historian, any special merit to sustain me on a level with my illustrious predecessors, I should owe it to teaching, which for me was friendship. Those great historians have been brilliant, judicious, and profound; as for me, I have loved more.

Nineteenth-century historians were not given to self-analysis. Michelet therefore provides, in the few, vivid paragraphs of this preface, a powerful indication of an increasing barrier to the practice of oral history: class. The nineteenth century was everywhere an age of increasing class and status consciousness. Historians were themselves evolving into a close profession, recruited through education. The very few who made their way into it from relatively humble backgrounds were much more likely to remain, because of the difficult experience of social mobility, withdrawn, like Michelet in his early adulthood. Among these Michelet was exceptional: few shared either the political commitment or the personality which enabled him to break back into easy contact with the people. As we shall see, the exclusive professionalism exemplified in Germany proved more compelling. And the very fecundity of production of secondary oral sources made it more possible, by the mid-nineteenth century, for a great historian to write without the use of any 'living documents'.

Michelet himself knew this as well as any man of his time. In 1831 he had been appointed chief of the historical section of the National Archives of France, an immense collection which had been brought together when the French Revolution 'emptied the contents of monasteries, castles, and other receptacles on one common floor'. He used it for his own *History of France* (1835–67), and his afterword to its second volume provides an equally telling psychological insight,

this time into the personality of the archival historian It is a species of fantasy hymn

The day will be ours, for we are death All gravities to us, and every revolution turns to our profit Sooner or later, conquering or conquered come to us We have the monarchy, safe and sound, from its alpha to its omega the keys of the Bastille, the minute of the declaration of the rights of man

As for me, when I first entered these catacombs of manuscripts, this wonderful necropolis of national monuments, I would willingly have exclaimed 'This is my rest for ever, here will I dwell, for I have desired it'

However, I was not slow to discern in the midst of the apparent silence of these galleries, a movement and a murmur which were not those of death These papers and parchments, so long deserted, desired no better than to be restored to the light of day yet they are not papers but lives of men, of provinces, and of nations All lived and spoke, and surrounded the author with an army speaking a hundred tongues

As I breathed on their dust, I saw them rise up They raised from the sepulchre, one the head, the other the hand, as in the Last Judgement of Michelangelo, or in the Dance of Death This galvanic dance, which they performed around me, I have essayed to reproduce in this work.

The notion that the document is not mere paper, but reality, is here converted into a macabre gothic delusion, a romantic nightmare But it is nevertheless one of the psychological assumptions which underpin the documentary empirical tradition in history generally, and not in France alone In a much more careful, veiled form, for example, one may find the same dream in that early masterpiece of English professional scholarship, F W Maitland's *Domesday Book and Beyond* (1897) 'If English history is to be understood, the law of Domesday Book *must be mastered*' Maitland looks forward to a future in which the documents have all been reorganized, edited, analysed Only then, he writes, 'by slow degrees the thoughts of our forefathers, their common thoughts about common things, will have become thinkable once more ' And the dream is there in the title itself 'Domesday Book appears to me, not indeed as the

known, but as the knowable. Beyond is still very dark: but the way to it lies through the Norman record.'[19]

It was this documentary tradition which emerged during the nineteenth century as the central discipline of a new professional history. Its roots go back to the negative scepticism of the Enlightenment as well as to the archival dreams of the Romantics. An early example is that of the Scottish historian William Robertson who, in his *History of the Reign of Charles V* (1769), publicly reprimanded Voltaire for his failure to cite sources. He had himself gone to unusual lengths to base his *History of Scotland* (1759) on original documents, and was able to cite seven major archives, including the British Museum, although 'that Noble Collection' was 'not yet open to the public. . . . Publick archives, as well as the repositories of private men, have been ransacked . . . But many important papers have escaped the notice of (others) . . . It was my duty to search for these, and I found this unpleasant task attended with considerable utility . . . By consulting them, I have been enabled, in many instances, to correct the inaccuracies of former Historians.' Archival research at this stage is thus seen essentially as a distasteful corrective duty, rather than a creative skill. And it is the same negative scepticism which leads Robertson to reject out of hand the entire oral tradition of early Scottish history, dismissing it as 'the fabulous tales of . . . ignorant Chroniclers'. The history of Scotland before the tenth century was not even worth study. 'Everything beyond that short period to which well attested annals reach, is obscure . . . the region of pure fable and conjecture, and ought to be totally neglected.'[20]

It is less easy to see why this sceptical approach should have triumphed in the nineteenth century. Paradoxically, the same romanticism which breathed life into the documentary method also set going folklore collecting all over Europe, and recovered for the great epics and sagas of oral traditions the respect which they deserved. In Britain the folklore movement developed independently of professional history, on a local antiquarian or literary basis, largely amateur, and adopted its own special evolutionary theory

of 'survivals' from Darwin In France and Italy—where interest could be traced back at least to the eighteenth-century philosopher-historian Vico—folklore became a much more respected branch of scholarship But it gained its greatest hold in Scandinavia and in Germany Here, as in Britain, there had been earlier instances of collecting and publishing, but this initial antiquarianism was succeeded by a sophisticated methodology, using a historical-geographical framework for systematic documentation and comparison And in this much more rigorous form folklore scholarship has, as we shall see, made a direct contribution to the modern oral history movement At the same time it came to be seen as an important way of recovering a lost national spirit and culture, not only in Scandinavia, but also in Germany

Equally important, the Romantic Movement led in the philosophy of history to a widespread acceptance of the importance of cultural history and the need to understand the different standards of judgement of earlier epochs and, eventually, other societies This was again especially true of Germany where the narrowly confident universalistic rationalism of the Enlightenment had been resisted almost from the start, most notably by Herder, with his belief that the very essence of history was in its plenitude and variety Here already were the first steps towards a cultural relativism And it was from Vienna that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the modern understanding of individual personality through psychology originated, carrying with it the implications of a less judgemental, more relativist attitude towards individuals in history German philosophers of history unfortunately took little consistent interest in psychology But the possibility of a new understanding of the historical value of individual life stories was certainly there, and at least one German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey, came at times very close to it, as is demonstrated in some of his reflections on the meaning of History

Autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us Here is the outward, phenomenal course of a life which forms the basis for understanding what has produced it within a certain environment

The person who seeks the connecting threads in the history of his life has already, from different points of view, created a coherence in that life which he is now putting into words ... He has, in his memory, singled out and accentuated the moments which he experienced as significant; others he has allowed to sink into forgetfulness ...

Thus, the first problem of grasping and presenting historical connections is already half solved by life.[21]

How was this opportunity lost? What led the documentary method to its narrowing, scarcely mitigated triumph in the very same decades through German example? This is a question which needs to be more fully explored. But part of the explanation undoubtedly lies in the changing social position of the historian. The development of an academic, historical profession in the nineteenth century brought with it a more precise and conscious social standing. It also required that historians, like other professionals, should have some form of distinctive training. And both the research doctorate, and the systematic teaching of historical methodology, are derived from Germany. Research training was begun by Leopold von Ranke after his appointment in 1825 as Professor at Berlin. Ranke was already thirty, but he was to live to the age of ninety, and during the succeeding decades his research seminar became the most influential historical training-ground in Europe. He was in some ways an old-fashioned figure, a sceptic as much as a romantic despite his fascination with medieval Germany. It was a rejection of Scott's novels as factually unreliable which first led him to resolve that in his own work he would avoid all fabrication and fiction, and stick severely to the facts. But in his first great masterpiece, the *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations* (1824), despite his famous destruction of Guiccardini's credibility and his dictum that history should be written *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (as it really was), he also declared himself opposed to research for its own sake; it was only in the final stage of his work that he had resorted to archives for confirmation. And although the *History of the Popes* (1837) was based on a more active approach, he certainly never shared the positive fascination with archives

of his contemporary Michelet. Indeed, later in life he evolved a routine which avoided any direct contact with archives. Documents were brought to him in his own home by his own research assistants, who would read them aloud. If he so instructed, the assistant would make a copy of the document. Ranke would work each day from 9.30 am until 2 pm with his first assistant, and from 7 pm with his second, in between taking a walk with a servant in the park, dinner, and a brief sleep. What mattered most was the relentlessness of his systematic, critical spirit. He directly trained over a hundred eminent German university historians. In his research seminar, although they were allowed to choose their own topic, he set them on to medieval documentary work simply because that was the most difficult to master. And when professional training began to spread, first to France in the 1860s and later elsewhere in Europe and in America, it was founded on Ranke's assumptions. C. V. Langlois and Charles Seignobos of the Sorbonne opened ... *to the Study of History* (1898), 'The historian works with ...stitute for documents: *no* documents, no history.'[44]

The documentary method not only provided an ideal training-ground, but it offered three other key advantages to the professional historian. First, the test of a young scholar's ability could become the writing of a monograph, the exploration of a corner of the past, perhaps minute, but based on original documents, and therefore, in that sense at least, original. Secondly, it gave to the discipline a distinct method of its own, which—unlike the use of oral evidence—could be claimed as an expert specialism, not shared by others. This self-identification around a distinct method—like the archaeological dig, the sociological survey, the anthropologist's field-trip—is typical of nineteenth-century professionalism and had the added function of making the evaluation of expertise an internal matter, not subject to the judgement of outsiders. Thirdly, for the increasing number of historians who preferred being shut up in their studies to mixing with either the society of the rich and p

with ordinary people, documentary research was an invaluable social protection. By cutting themselves off they could also pretend to an objective neutrality, and thence even come to believe that insulation from the social world was a positive professional virtue. Nor is it accidental that the cradle of this academic professionalism should have been nineteenth-century Germany, where university professors constituted a narrow patrician middle-class group, particularly sharply cut off through their isolation in small provincial towns, political impotence, and the acute hierarchical status-consciousness of Germany, from the realities of political and social life.

In Britain the full development of these tendencies came relatively late. Although the documents of the Constitution had been firmly enough enshrined by Bishop Stubbs, eminent late nineteenth-century scholars like Thorold Rogers and J. R. Green did not trouble to footnote their main works, and even the *Cambridge Modern History*, launched by Lord Acton in 1902 as 'the final stage in the conditions of historical learning', was intended to be without footnotes.[23] The academic establishment was still widely linked both through kin and personal careers with London society and the political world. Thus Beatrice and Sidney Webb, in the midst of their political work for the Poor Law Commission, were also writing the chapter on social movements for the *Cambridge Modern History*; while R. C. K. Ensor, who wrote the highly successful Oxford volume on *England 1870–1914* (1936), had spent most of his life in journalism, politics, and social work. Lewis Namier's famous puncturing of the old Whig school of history, *The Structure of Politics at the Assession of George III*, only came out in 1929. It was not until the post-Second World War expansion of the universities that the research doctorate became the standard method of entry into the historical profession. Its full advantages, and disadvantages, are therefore a comparative novelty to British historians.

By this stage the ideal moment of the documentary method had already passed. It always had its critics. Even Langlois and Siegnobos warned against the 'mental deformations' which critical scholarship had led to in Germany: a textual

criticism lost in insignificant minutiae, separated by a chasm from not just general culture, but the larger questions of history itself. 'Some of the most accomplished critics merely make a trade of their skill, and have never reflected on the ends to which their art is a means.' They also commented on the ease with which a 'spontaneous credulity' of anything documented can develop (rather characteristically instancing memoirs as a type of document deserving 'special distrust') and argued for both analytic criticism and comparative evidence for establishing facts: 'It is by combining observations that every science is built up: a scientific fact is a centre on which several different observations converge.' Their first point is repeated by R. G. Collingwood in *The Idea of History* (1946), who condemns a training that 'led to the corollary that nothing was a legitimate problem for history unless it was either a microscopic problem, or else capable of being treated as a group of microscopic problems'; he instances Mommsen, who 'was able to compile a corpus of inscriptions or a handbook of Roman Constitutional law with almost incredible accuracy . . . but his attempt to write a history of Rome broke down exactly at the point where his own contributions to Roman history began to be important'.[24] If such comments had force then they have still more today in a rapidly changing world which demands explanations for its own instability. An escape from major problems of historical interpretation into microscopic investigation is increasingly difficult to justify. The documentary tradition has thus found itself increasingly on the defensive in the face of the growth of the social sciences, with their claims to superior powers of interpretation and theory.

Still more critically, the documentary school faces a shifting of its very foundation, for the document itself has changed its social function in two ways. First, the most important communications between people are no longer made through documents (if they ever were) but orally, by meeting or telephone. Secondly, the record has lost its innocence (if it ever had one); it is now understood to have potential value as future propaganda.

The stages of this change have been shrewdly discussed by

was always desirable Meanwhile a similar process of change had started with home documents Confidential cabinet papers were being kept by politicians and some were able to use them in their memoirs For a long time this tendency was fought, but effective recognition that no document could be regarded as permanently confidential (except perhaps by the police or secret services) came with the reduction of the waiting period for normal access to scholars to a mere thirty years The consequence can be seen in the comment made to A J P Taylor by Richard Crossman, former Cabinet minister 'I've discovered, having read all the Cabinet papers about the meetings I attended, that the documents often bear virtually no relation to what actually happened I know now that the Cabinet Minutes are written by Burke Trend (secretary to the Cabinet), not to say what *did* happen in the Cabinet, but what the Civil Service wishes it to be believed happened, so that a clear directive can be given' In the decades before the First World War, however, such tampering was only beginning Equally important was the fact that this was the golden era of the personal letter When dealing with the post-First World War period, Taylor him self has argued for the use of 'non literary sources The more evidence we have, the more questioning we often become Now we have recording instruments for both sight and sound' But he saw such needs in contrast to an earlier period

The seventy years covered by this book are an ideal field for the diplomatic historian Full records were kept, without thought that they would ever be published, except for the occasional dis patch which a British statesman composed 'for the Blue Book' It was the great age of writing Even close colleagues wrote to each other, sometimes two or three times a day Bismarck did all his thinking on paper, and he was not alone Only Napoleon III kept his secrets to himself and thwarted posterity Now the telephone and the personal meeting leave gaps in our knowledge which can never be filled While diplomacy has become more formal, the real process of decision escapes us '[6]

We have arrived, in short, at the age of the telephone and the tape recorder a change in methods of communication which will in time bring about as important an alteration to

the character of history as the manuscript, the printing press, and the archive have in the past.

It looks, too, as if it may be a swifter change. The technological basis has certainly evolved with great rapidity. The first recording machine, the phonograph, was invented in 1877, and the steel wire recorder just before 1900. By the 1930s a considerably improved version was good enough for use in broadcasting. A decade later magnetic tape was available and the first tape recorders of the reel-to-reel type sold on the market. The much cheaper cassette recorders came in the early 1960s. Today it is practicable for any historian to consider using a recorder in collecting evidence. This transformation of technology provides one reason why the modern oral history movement has its origins in most countries in substantially and quite often nationally funded enterprises, yet has more recently been growing equally fast as a form of diffused local and popular history.

Let us turn then to the pattern of the revival, bearing in mind the constraints imposed by resources. Where has oral history grown most strongly? How have the intellectual contributions to the reviving use of oral evidence, and the patterns of sponsorship, varied from place to place? We can start most conveniently with North America, which has seen the most explosive growth of all.

The antecedents of the movement there go back many years. H. H. Bancroft's interviewing of the 1860s was succeeded by other intermittent work on the frontier settlements; and the American Folklore Society dates back to 1888. In the 1920s came the great break forward of American urban sociology from its English-influenced origins to the Chicago studies of the 1920s, like Harvey Zorbaugh's *Gold Coast and Slum* (1929), vibrant with direct observation and interpretation of city life, and centrally concerned with documenting and explaining it. In these early years the Chicago sociologists were remarkably inventive in their methods, making use of direct interviewing, participant observation, documentary research, mapping, and statistics. They developed a special interest in the life history method. Thus W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki in their massive pioneering account

of immigration, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–20), gave an entire volume to the *Life Record of an Immigrant*, a specially solicited written autobiography which provides a link between studies on social disorganization in Poland and the origins of emigration, and on the Polish community in Chicago. A continuation of interest can be seen in John Dollard's early study, *Criteria for Life History* (1935). But although there are some direct links with more recent sociological work, which overlaps with oral history, on the whole they are surprisingly rare. This is because the Chicago school, despite such a promising beginning, before long became a victim of professionalization among sociologists, and retreated from the immediacy of the city around it to the security of research doctorates based on statistical analysis and abstract general theory.

Its legacy was not forgotten. It is still alive in the work of the Chicago journalist and oral historian, Studs Terkel. Another link with the present is through American anthropology. The inter-war years were a period in which the general tendency in anthropology was strongly influenced by Malinowski's argument that oral traditions, just because their key function was to justify and explain the present, had virtually no value as history: myth was 'neither a fictitious story, nor an account of a dead past; it is a statement of a bigger reality still partially alive'. Although his views applied more to oral tradition than to direct personal life-story evidence, they undoubtedly inhibited any move in this direction too. In America, however, anthropologists working among North American Indians and in Mexico were also in contact with the development of psychology and sociology, and took up the life-history method. Thus the recent work of Oscar Lewis can be traced back, through Leo Simmons' *Sun Chief* (1942), an oral history project jointly sponsored by the anthropologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists at Yale, to Paul Radin's *Crashing Thunder* (1926), an American-Indian life-story inspired by the need 'of obtaining an inside view of their culture from their own lips and by their own initiative'.[27]

Most striking of all was an experiment launched und-

government sponsorship to fight unemployment in the New Deal: the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s. An astonishing series of life-story interviews was collected right across the country with former black slaves, workers, and homesteaders, the richness of which is only now beginning to be fully appreciated. Much of this material remained unpublished, but one contemporary selection, published in North Carolina and edited by W. T. Couch under the title *These Are Our Lives* (1939), shows a remarkable understanding of the radical potential of oral history. Sociology, Couch argued, had been 'content in the main to treat human beings as abstractions', or when case histories were used, to dissect them as 'segments of experience' in the analysis of particular problems such as social maladjustment. But it would be possible, 'through life histories selected to represent the different types present among the people'—in appropriate proportions—to portray an entire community. His own collection of life histories was intended to represent for their region 'a fair picture of the structure and working of society. So far as I know, this method of portraying the quality of life of a people, of revealing the real workings of institutions, customs, habits, has never before been used for the people of any region or country.'[28]

Despite such anticipations, it was from another direction that the key step in the modern movement came: political history. 'Oral history', the (American) Oral History Association declares, 'was established in 1948 as a modern technique for historical documentation when Columbia University historian Allan Nevins began recording the memoirs of persons significant in American life'. The Columbia approach, the privately financed 'great man' recording project, proved immensely attractive to both national foundations and local fund-givers, and especially to retiring politicians. Indeed, for at least two decades it *was* 'oral history' in America—and only very recently has the method been vigorously revived for Indian history, black history, and folklore, and extended into new fields like women's history. The North American scene is now one of both variety and vitality, especially if one includes the lively Canadian Oral

History Association formed in 1974 and the impressive national programme in Mexico. The Oral History Association itself has over a thousand members and its 1971 directory listed 230 current projects. In the three countries together there are probably 100,000 recorded hours of interviews collected, and over a million pages of transcript. These figures reflect the sheer resources which have made such a scale of field-work possible.

The second great concentration is in north-west Europe. There is considerable activity elsewhere, too: in South America, mainly under North American influence; in Australia, where it has brought local and labour historians together with anthropologists of the Aboriginal peoples; in Africa and in Israel, where European and American influences have combined in different ways with resurgent nationalism. For Israel, after the systematic destruction of Jewish communities under Fascism, oral evidence became a vital part of a national and cultural struggle for survival. Within Europe there are parallels, more remotely in the link between nineteenth-century nationalism and folklore collecting, but also directly. In Italy, one of the twin concerns of contemporary oral history has been in local studies of the anti-Fascist wartime Partisans (the other being the subsequent change in working-class consciousness during the years of the post-War economic boom). And in Holland, since 1962, oral history has been based on a well-organized co-operation between contemporary political historians, the International Institute for Social History, and Dutch radio; and documenting Fascism has also been a principal object. Conversely, the late start of an oral history movement in Germany is partly explained by the impact of Nazism, in discrediting the folklore movement by espousing it, and at the same time destroying the germs of a more fruitful approach to survey research which by the early 1930s had been shown in a study like *Marienthal*. It is much less clear why France, with the example not only of Michelet but of the sociological school of Durkheim (which drew together anthropological and folklore material) to build upon, has so far shown only a little activity in oral history.

It is in Scandinavia, and in the British Isles, that the most strongly established European developments can be found. In Scandinavia the roots lie in the systematic folklore collecting of the nineteenth century. The first archives for direct field-work were set up in Finland as early as the 1830s. The Finnish example was followed especially in Sweden. Students at the University of Uppsala formed dialect societies in the 1870s to collect provincial words and expressions which they feared were threatened with extinction. Already by the 1890s this collecting had been systematized into a national questionnaire interview survey, answered in a thousand different locations over the whole country, and by 1914 the Institute for Dialect and Folklore Research was founded with financial support from the Swedish Parliament. The scope of its collecting gradually widened into a national study of rural society, culture, and economy. And from 1935 the Institute made regular use of recording machines in its field-work—almost certainly the first organization to do so for the purposes of historical research.

This Swedish example proved of particular importance in the development of oral history in Britain. Here again a strong interest had developed in folklore, mainly on an amateur basis. But in Ireland and Wales, and to a lesser extent in Scotland, this was reinforced through association with nationalist movements. The Irish government began to assist collecting in 1930, and in 1935 set up the Irish Folklore Institute. From the start this had direct links with Swedish scholars and also made use of recording machines. In Wales, the main centre became the Welsh Folk Museum at St. Fagans; in Scotland systematic collecting was led from the Edinburgh University School of Scottish Studies, whose archive was started in 1951, originally with a Gaelic and literary focus but before long also drawing in social and English language material. Lastly, in England the major comparable enterprises are the Dialect Survey begun in about 1950 from Leeds University and the subsequent Survey of Language and Folklore from Sheffield.

The renewal of contact with scholars working in separate but related disciplines was for British historians to be one of

the most interesting consequences of the new oral history movement It was anticipated in the rapprochement between anthropologists and historians of Africa From the 1950s, led by the Belgian scholar Jan Vansina, and John Fage and Roland Oliver from Britain, historians had begun to collect their own oral material in the field, alongside anthropologists, exchanging experience of methods and interpretation with them Centres for this kind of academic study developed in London and America, and also within Africa

None of this, however, made much conscious impact on the academic historians of England itself before the late 1960s Their eventual awakening to the potential of oral history came from three sides First, through their own radio activities some historians became aware of the remarkable resources of the B B C Sound Archives, which had been founded in the 1930s [29] Secondly, there was the popular success of Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield Portrait of an English Village* (1969), a blend of literature, history, and sociology based on tape recordings from Suffolk country people Thirdly, there was the convergence of sociology and history British sociology expanded rapidly in the 1960s and at the same time showed an increasing concern with a historical dimension in social analysis It is no accident that one of the most significant recent books using oral evidence is a historical study of the relationship between religion, economics, and class consciousness by a sociologist—Robert Moore's *Pit men, Preachers and Politics* (1974) Thea Vigne and I started our own national interview survey of family life, work, and community before 1918 from the sociology department of Essex University in 1968 We drew on the sociological experience of colleagues such as Peter Townsend and Dennis Marsden whose work was derived from the classic tradition of Rowntree, Booth, and the Webbs We were given the financial support of the newly established Social Science Research Council

Since then oral history has grown fast in Britain The Oral History Society was formed in 1973, and within four years had some 400 members It drew on each of these developing strands, and others too The larger new projects tended to be

in social history, funded by the government Research Council and owing something to sociological influence. But others were started in colonial and military history. There was also renewed activity in those branches of history which, for different reasons, had retained at least a minority tradition of oral field-work: recent political history, labour history, and local history.

In recent political history the change has been least obvious, because although often not cited, there has been continuous use of the interview as a method of exploration, discovering documents, and checking interpretation. A modern political biographer would always seek to learn from conversation with a subject, just as, for example, John Morley did from the ageing Gladstone. But the advent of the tape recorder provided for some biographers a more systematic method of collecting interview evidence.

With labour history the line of development from the Webbs is clearer. There is now a great deal of activity in this field, including substantial projects; the Society for the Study of Labour History has come to publish oral history material in its *Bulletin*, and listen to tape extracts at its meetings; and oral evidence has from the start been one of the distinctive marks of the *History Workshop* movement, which began out of working-class labour and social history at Ruskin College, Oxford, and has widened its range to address itself, in its journal's words, 'to the fundamental elements of social life—work and material culture, class relations and politics, sex divisions and marriage, family, school, and home'.

Lastly, there has been a great growth in local history. Some of it is urban; but more is rural, where the method has deeper roots. Gough has been mentioned as one type; folklore collecting provided another; and a remarkable example was also set by the Women's Institute histories from the 1920s. These were village surveys, based partly on the example of the Scottish Statistical Accounts, but equally—through the influence of C. V. Butler—on Rowntree's social surveys. Joan Wake's *How to Compile a history and present day record of village life* (1925) was written for the women's institute surveys, and

gives excellent advice both on documentary research and the use of interviews to collect information from old people on farming methods, tenancies, wages, trades and industry, transport, emigrants, schools, clubs, friendly societies, trade unions, health, food, religion, and crime, old stories folklore, songs, and games, and personal reminiscences 'Why not have "reminiscence parties"—when each in turn would recall and relate his or her experiences, while someone took them down in shorthand?' she suggested After the Second World War Women's Institutes or Old People's Welfare Councils in many counties sponsored essay competitions in the same spirit, although without the focus of the inter-war village surveys, extracts have been published as Pat Barr's *I Remember* (1970) as well as in local booklets It is partly from this strong tradition of local history, as well as from his understanding of folklore and of work experience, that the work of George Ewart Evans springs, especially in his first book, *Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay* (1956) In its title and introduction this village study in fact constitutes the first appeal for the present English oral history movement

Oral history has grown where there was a surviving tradition of field work within history itself, as with political history, labour, and local history, or where historians have been brought into contact with other field work disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, or dialect and folklore research Its geographical distribution also reflects the availability of money for field work hence the high concentration in North America and north-west Europe For the same reason government sponsorship, especially of folklore collection, but also through unemployment schemes, radio archives, and social science research councils, have been key influences in most countries In the United States some major government projects exist, but they chiefly concern the military forces and the experience of war As a result, private funding has been dominant, with an emphasis on the recording of just those people who are most likely to leave written records, the national and local élites There are even oral history projects on the fund giving foundations themselves Thus the patterns of sponsorship—and, it co

be argued, the political assumptions which lie behind them—have also been key factors in shaping different national developments.

There is, however, one more factor: the nature of opposition. The system of private funding in America has had, in this respect, the happy consequence of allowing oral historians to go their own way, loosely attached to local universities, colleges, and libraries; although less fortunately it has led to the typical American oral historian being primarily an archivist and collector rather than a historian as such. In Britain, by contrast, a sharper struggle for resources and recognition was inevitable. With the economic recession and public spending cuts of the mid-1970s, any new claimant for scarce public funds was bound to meet opposition. Even the Social Science Research Council from cautious support had by 1976 switched to an openly hostile policy of 'containment':

> In one field—oral history—noted in the Committee's last report for its rapid growth, we have followed a policy of containment. The Committee is currently unwilling to invest further funds until the outcome of projects already supported can be assessed. There are methodological difficulties surrounding the field, as well as uncertainties about suitable depositories for tapes and transcriptions, and for an agreed form of final product.[30]

If this opposition proves successful for long, the main damage will be to professional historians themselves. Oral history will be developed principally by sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists within educational institutions, and by lay historians in the community. Professional historians will miss the stimulation of inter-disciplinary work, and of contact with their own basic constituency; and they will allow oral history to evolve in ways which disregard their own needs and standards. For example, the present inadequacy of archival facilities, and the consequent destruction of a high proportion of the oral evidence which is actually being collected, is likely to continue until the historical profession accepts that oral records are of as much value as written documentation.

have of course always recognized this: like the *Annales* school in France, or in Britain K. H. Connell, who in his influential discussion of the post-famine demographic transformation of the Irish family used oral tradition collected by the Irish Folklore Commission as one key source of evidence. There has meanwhile been a reaction within sociology itself against a predominantly statistical methodology in survey analysis, and a move towards less rigidly structured interviewing in the field which has brought sociology closer to oral history. Thus the more extravagant hopes of the neo-positivist statistical school look increasingly dated. One can see more clearly how far Michael Anderson's analysis of *Family Structure in Nineteenth Century Lancashire* is distorted by sticking to a rigid economistic model of the family which allows, for a half-Catholic town in the decade of Chartist unrest, neither political, nor religious, nor psychological factors to be considered. And the daring acrobatics of an economic historian like R. W. Fogel, who will construct data when he cannot find it, and aspire to re-evaluate the entire experience of slavery with sets of tables, now seem sorties which reveal more of the pitfalls of the method than its strengths. It is difficult to believe that economic history and demography, which through their closeness to the social sciences are naturally more familiar with the interviewing method than most branches of history, and have indeed already produced some notable supporters of oral history, will remain long-term obstacles to its advance.

The professional old guard looks at first sight more formidable. A. J. P. Taylor, for example, despite his awareness of the receding value of the written document, maintains his resistance to the interview method. 'In this matter I am an almost total sceptic . . . Old men drooling about their youth —No.'[32] And if the old-style documentary historian is likely to find history increasingly difficult to reconstruct from the twentieth century onwards, he has only to stay on the firmer earlier ground to which he is already well fastened. But the situation is in practice less fixed than it looks. The traditional historian, partly because he is suspicious of theories and prefers to construct his interpretation from individual pieces

of evidence gathered wherever he can locate them, is at heart an eclectic If he is suspicious of oral evidence, it is chiefly just because until very recently it was, to an extent which now seems difficult to recall, either hidden or unrecognized by him Arthur Marwick in his *The Nature of History*, published only in 1970, includes a very catholic discussion of historical sources in his chapter on 'The Historian at Work', ranging from the accepted hierarchy of primary and secondary written sources to statistics, maps, buildings, landscape, imaginative literature, art, customs, and 'the *folkways* of the period' He even argues that 'a history based exclusively on non-documentary sources, as say the history of an African community, may be a sketchier, less satisfactory history than one drawn from documents, but it is history all the same' [33] Yet he includes no reference whatever to oral evidence as such It seems unlikely that a similar passage today would not discuss both the interview method and oral tradition The awareness of these potential sources is now widespread, and awareness itself brings a degree of acceptance In addition, oral history projects have created a number of archives, which are being used by research students and cited in their theses, frequently with the encouragement of their supervisors For this new generation then, oral evidence is again counted among acceptable sources And if it can be cited in theses, can there be, in principle, any objection to its collection in direct fieldwork?

The fact is that the opposition to oral evidence is as much founded on feeling as on principle The older generation of historians who hold the chairs and the purse-strings are instinctively apprehensive about the advent of a new method It implies that they no longer command all the techniques of their profession Hence the disparaging comments about young men tramping the streets with tape recorders, and the grasping of straws to justify their scepticism usually a reminiscence (it should be noted) about the inaccuracy of either their own or some other person's memory Beyond this there is—and not only among older scholars—a fear of the social experience of interviewing, of the need to come out

closet and talk with ordinary people. But time will temper all these feelings: the old will be succeeded; and a widening number will themselves know the positive social and intellectual experience of oral history.

The discovery of 'oral history' by historians which is now under way is, then, unlikely to be obscured. And it is not only a discovery but a recovery. It gives history a future no longer tied to the cultural significance of the paper document. It also gives back to historians the oldest skill of their own craft.

3

The Achievement of Oral History

How do we measure the achievement of oral history? Against a roll call of its long past Herodotus, Bede, Clarendon, Scott, Michelet, Mayhew ? Or its present ambitions and diversity? It is not possible to mark any clear boundary around the work of a movement which brings together so many different kinds of specialists The method of oral history is also used by many scholars, especially sociologists and anthropologists, who do not think of themselves as oral historians The same is true of journalists Yet all may be writing history, and they are certainly providing for it And for different reasons professional historians are also unlikely to conceive of their work as 'oral history' Quite properly, their focus is on a chosen historical problem rather than the methods used in solving it, and will normally choose to use oral evidence along with other sources, rather than alone The term 'oral history' is itself a contribution to this confusion

. . it implies a misleading analogy with already differentiated aspects of history—economic, agricultural, medical, legal, and so on Whereas oral history can never be a 'compartment' of history in its own right, it is a technique that could conceivably be used in any branch of the discipline. The title also suggests—indeed invites—another hiving off when in fact it is clear to anyone who has taken oral evidence in the field over any length of time that compiling oral sources is an activity that points to the connectedness of all aspects of history and not to their divisions from each other [1]

If the full potential of oral history is realized, it will result not so much in a specific list of titles to be found in

section of historical bibliographies, as in an underlying change in the way in which history is written and learnt, in its questions and its judgements, and in its texture. What follows is a discussion of simply one dimension of oral history—the impact of new oral evidence in existing fields of historical study—and the examples cited are deliberately limited to modern works. Even so, it is difficult to make any satisfactory balanced choice between, on the one hand, the considerable number of often brief articles, especially on research in progress, which are known through direct publication in journals and bibliographies of the formal oral history movement, and on the other, the infinite but often substantial publications in sociology, anthropology, folklore, contemporary history, politics, and biography which lie to its fringes. A full survey of each field in turn would indeed be impossibly lengthy, and this will be simply an illustrative discussion.

Let us begin with economic history. Oral evidence here has two rather different influences, first as a corrective and supplement to existing sources, and secondly in opening up new problems for consideration. For some aspects of economic history, such as government policy, foreign trade, or banking and insurance, the existing documentation is abundant even if sometimes narrow in focus. But this is far less so of industry itself. Some of the major aggregate statistical indices, for example of real wages, of hours, and of productivity, are compilations resting to a quite considerable extent on either inadequate documentation or on absolute guesswork despite the confidence with which they are normally presented. This can be illustrated by the case of mining. Christopher Storm-Clark has shown how existing documentary records are both insufficient and misleading. The mining industry before the late nineteenth century consisted chiefly of small, shallow, and often short-lived local pits; yet the evidence which survives is not merely scarce and fragmentary, but heavily biased towards the atypical large-scale capita[illegible]ive pits and th[illegible] associated settlements. The [illegible] and cons[illegible]estruction of their records fro[illegible] onwards, the unwilling-

ness of owners to allow their examination, and the subsequently similar fears of the National Coal Board, have improved neither their availability nor their informative content For his own research, Storm Clark has therefore used interviewing partly to collect basic information about the technology and work organization of the type of pit whose records are missing Interviews also supply much fuller evidence of the processes of recruitment into the pits and migration into mining districts than any colliery records Perhaps most striking, however, has been their value in elucidating and correcting the very information which, at least for certain pits, Colliery Wage Books do supply on working hours and wages Interviews indicate that for the individual miner hours remained very flexible, while the system of piecework payments divided between workgroups of miners was so complex and variable that the concept of a wage *rate* for the period before 1914 is 'almost entirely meaningless' [2]

The same kinds of arguments for the value of oral evidence in relation to documents apply to other industries Gould Colman has shown how interviews can throw a wholly different light on the functioning of marketing arrangements in the New York milk industry of the 1930s, and hence the roles of the Dairymen's League and the smaller producers in the New Deal struggles Allan Nevins' massive social and industrial biography of Henry Ford, his company and the automobile industry, shows how oral evidence can bring out more clearly than documents the working methods of a great innovator But it is equally important to understand, in contrast to the big success story, the small firm like a country town iron foundry which did *not* grow into a great company, and, a step further back, the rural craftsmen—wheelwrights, smiths, thatchers, and so on—for whom written documentation is still sparser, but for whom now exists abundant literature drawing considerably on oral sources Again, it is often only oral evidence which allows adequate study of a transient economic activity which may be a vital part of the wider picture Thus there are virtually no written records of itinerant trades—hawking,

credit-drapery, market-trading, and so on—and even for the highly organized brewing industry, there is only the barest documentation of the regular organized seasonal migration of farm labourers from East Anglia to Burton-on Trent. And in the case of fishing we have an entire industry dominated by small firms and seasonal labour, whose history could be effectively written in no other way.

The most sustained oral history work, of critical significance for economic history, has, however, concerned agriculture. Here again accounts, wage books, and diaries can normally only be found for the larger, and more technologically advanced farms. The very existence of such records denotes an unusual degree of efficiency. Even where records exist, the information provided on, for example, wage rates or work techniques is normally inadequate, and frequently either incomprehensible or misleading. To secure any reliable indication of the normal labour patterns or the variations in technological level within a particular district, oral evidence is essential. The collecting of such source material has been most systematically carried out in Wales and Scotland, but as sociology, anthropology, or folklore rather than as economic history. More recently there has been distinguished work by David Jenkins and by Eric Cregeen on the social economy of these regions. But the demonstration of the relevance of oral field-work to agricultural economic history was led by George Ewart Evans, in his studies of East Anglian agriculture, *The Horse in the Furrow*, *The Farm and the Village*, and especially *Where Beards Wag All*: its methods, from the large steam-powered farm to the smallholding; cattle and corn economies; dealers, farmers, and farm labourers.

Less well developed, but hinted at in these studies of farmers and other rural businessmen, and in *From Mouths of Men* of a Yorkshire wool manufacturer, is another form in which oral evidence is beginning to contribute to economic history: the study of the entrepreneur. Although there is abundant autobiographical material on the upper- and middle-class intelligentsia, such information on the manufacturing and business classes is extraordinarily sparse.

Without it, questions such as the role of the family firm and the socialization and attitudes of entrepreneurs in British economic decline cannot be answered The major research study in this area has been that of Thea Vigne

There is also a potential link between economic history and the history of technological and scientific discovery, although at present those oral history studies which do exist in the history of science are more concerned with its socially prestigious forms There are projects in the history of medicine and psychiatry And David Edge has provided in his *Astronomy Transformed The Emergence of Radio Astronomy in Britain*, a penetrating analysis of the post war growth of the most spectacular, expensive, and perhaps least socially relevant 'big science', radio astronomy Partly through his own previous experience in the same science, he understood that the paucity of records left by scientists was no accident, they did not regard their own earlier gropings and mistakes as relevant to the history of science, which they believed proceeded in a rational sequence of discoveries Through interview evidence he has been able to show that the true picture is very different a story of dead ends, of misunderstandings, and of discoveries by accident, within a social setting of acute rivalries, partly handled by group specialization, but sometimes leading to the deliberate concealment of information This constitutes therefore an important contribution to the historical study of scientific method, in which the scientist himself, from cool, rational super man becomes a more human and more political animal

The history of science is of course but one branch of intellectual history A particularly interesting area is the history of religion, for oral sources can here be used to distinguish the beliefs and practices of ordinary adherents from those of their leaders How far, for example, has religion shaped the values of the lower middle-class white-collar worker? It is possible also to examine the 'common religion', superstitions, and rituals at birth, or marriage and death of the non religious—by their nature areas mostly out of the reach of recent institutional religious documentation And since the relationship between economic developm

religious ideologies of entrepreneurs and their workforces has long been a key subject of historical debate, this provides another point where oral evidence can continue economic history. A re-evaluation of the arguments of Weber, Halévy, and E. P. Thompson on this issue is the focus of Robert Moore's *Pit-men, Preachers and Politics*. This study of a Durham mining valley shows the role which Primitive Methodism, with its emphasis on individual self-improvement, backed by the paternalism of local pit-owners, played in inhibing the growth of militant class-consciousness among the miners, until its influence, along with the paternalism of the owners, collapsed in the face of the twentieth-century economic crisis of the industry. The account of religion, including the identification of those who were local adherents but not members of the chapels, depends heavily on oral evidence, and the combination of a painstaking local reconstruction with a general theoretical argument makes this book a significant landmark.

It also brings us to an area contingent on economic history, but especially significant for oral history in its own right—that of labour history. The range of work here has already been sufficient to justify a separate bibliographical essay, and runs from local booklets, and articles in journals such as the *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* or *Radical America*, to substantial books, and archive collections on the scale of the South Wales Miners' Library. The contribution of oral evidence can be seen in several different forms. The simplest is biographical. Even labour leaders do not normally leave substantial private records, so that oral evidence has proved of regular value in an undertaking such as John Saville and Joyce Bellamy's *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, as well as in individual studies. But it has also transformed the character of labour autobiography. With rare exceptions—like Fred Kitchen's *Brother to the Ox* (1940) and Margaret Llewelyn Davies's *Life as We Have Known It, by Co-operative Working Women* (1931)—the typical labour autobiography was until quite recently written by a trade union secretary or parliamentarian about his public life, at best prefaced by a few brief pages on his childhood and first job.

Owing to the recording work of oral historians, and also the influence of the radio, we now have life stories from a much wider range of authors from local as well as national leaders, from the ordinary rank and file, and also from non unionized workers, from women as well as from men, from labourers, domestic servants, sweated and casual workers, as well as from miners and labour aristocrats Equally important, the content and language have shifted from the public life to the ordinary experience of work and family A more intimate and anecdotal type of autobiography has emerged, leaving its mark on the published life story Its influence can be clearly seen in the extracts from recent manuscript autobiographies included by John Burnett in his fine collection, *Useful Toil* A very considerable number of similar oral autobiographies are now available in record offices and archives Only a small selection have so far been published, either as small local booklets, or as collections like Alice and Staughton Lynd's *Rank and File Personal Histories by Working Class Organisers from America*, or the People's Autobiography of Hackney's *Working Lives, 1905–45* There are also a growing number of remarkable printed autobiographies of the new kind, which started as oral recollections, like Arthur Randell's *Fenland Railwayman*, Angus Maclellan's *The Furrow Behind Me*, and Margaret Powell's *Below Stairs*

Oral evidence can also be used to amplify information on specific events in labour history, such as the evolution of an organization, or the course of a strike An exceptional example to which we shall return is Peter Friedlander's study of *The Emergence of a UAW Local 1936–1939*—the unionization of a Detroit car factory—which he built up almost entirely from a very searching form of interview More generally, the advantage gained has been both in the spread of informants and the broadening of information to cover more of ordinary experience and to most labour historians it will matter more how it is used than whether it comes in writing or on a recording This may be seen by comparing the rather directionless memories of industrial disputes in R Leeson's *Strike, a live history, 1887–1971* with the more purposeful written reminiscences which conclude Jeffrey Skelley's *The* 1

Strike. But better still are the essays in the same volume by Peter Wyncoll and Hywel Francis, and Anthony Mason's book on *The General Strike in the North-East*, which construct an account from a combination of oral and written evidence. A series of strikes can be analysed in the same way, like the harvest strikes of Norfolk farmworkers. Another approach is that of the urgent salvage operation to rescue material, often immediately in the wake of a dispute like the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in, or A. Lane and K. Roberts' report on the *Strike at Pilkington's*. Both approaches can be of different value, but there are two particular strengths in oral evidence of this kind. First, it can get beyond the formalities and heroics of contending leaderships, as represented in newspapers and records, to the more humdrum, confused reality and different standpoints within the rank and file, including that of the blacklegs. Sidney Pollard and Robert Turner's analysis of a profit-sharing Yorkshire woollen manufacturer's workforce and its attitudes handles a subject which would have otherwise proved impenetrable. And some of the most interesting work has been carried out on the workers who were *un*employed: both of their organizations, and their experience of life out of work—the long, fruitless search for a job, the pinching of food, the humilation of welfare—an experience depressingly similar whether in North America, Australia, or Britain. The widest collections of such evidence are in Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* and Barry Broadfoot's *Ten Lost Years*; but a richer, more reflective analysis, showing the use of the life-story at its best, is provided by Dennis Marsden and E. Duff's contemporary study, *Workless*.

A third form of oral labour history, which also runs parallel to sociological research, is the community study, to which we shall return later. The impact of oral history here can be suggested by contrasting the earlier sociological classic, Norman Dennis, F. Henriques, and C. Slaughter's *Coal is our Life* (1956), based on interviews, but largely dismissive of the historical material which they collected, with the more recently historical and sociological work of Storm-Clark and Moore, in which the retrospective reconstruction of class

relationships and sense of community has been a major concern The method has also allowed the extension of historical community study to much more sparsely documented occupations, such as the casual labourers, carters, quarrymen, and laundrywomen of Raphael Samuel's 'Quarry Roughs'

Finally, oral evidence has a special value to the labour historian concerned with the work process itself—not merely its technology, which we have discussed earlier, but the experience of work, and the social relationships which follow from it The experience of work is the concern of Studs Terkel s classic masterpiece, *Working* As with all his books, the effect is made not by explicit argument, but from cumulative interview extracts It is a thick book 600 pages in which 130 Americans pour out their work stories, old and young, real estate woman, priest, factory owner, industrial spy, airline stewardess, hair stylist, bar pianist, strip miner, car welder, truck-driver, policeman, garbage man, washroom attendant I know no other book which conveys so vividly the feeling of so many different kinds of job the incessant, relentless tensions of the telephone receptionist, the loneliness of a top consultant struggling to survive in the jungle of management, the steel millworker who would like the names of the workmen to be inscribed on what they make ('Somebody built the pyramids ') and short of this leaves here and there 'a little dent a mistake, mine my signature on 'em, too' [5] One constucts one's own interpretations, although Studs Terkel no doubt has a shrewd idea of how they are likely to shape

Much more clearly articulated studies of this type of labour history have been produced in Italy and in Britain Italian socialist concern at the declining militancy of industrial workers during the 'economic miracle' of the 1960s led to a search for a new understanding of the relationship between forms of factory production and working-class-consciousness through the direct feelings of workers themselves This has resulted on the one hand in historical studies such as Liliana Lanzardo's *Class Operaie e Partito Communista alla Fiat 1945–68*, and on the other in the collection and publication of factory interviews, songs, and poetry—by organizations

such as the Istituto Ernesto de Martiro and the Nuovo Canzoniere in Milan, and by autonomous workers' groups.

There is also a growing number of studies of work experience and work organization in Britain. Two of the best once again concern mining. David Douglass's *Pit life in County Durham*, based on a combination of documentary research and his own and other's experiences as miners, argues how the particular method of choosing work-mates and work-places in the Durham pits made for workers' control and rank and file militancy. George Ewart Evans sets out the system of the anthracite district of the South Wales coalfield, where the coal was near the surface, so that it was relatively easy for a small man to start his own drift mine; while its irregular geology gave special importance to the miner's skill. Owners and men lived and worked closely together. He then shows the impact of mechanization on the whole local social system, not merely destroying the status of the craftsmen, but also the close bond—sometimes paternal, sometimes exploitative—with the boys who formerly worked with them in their stalls, but now become a separate group beyond the control of the older generation. We have here an excellent example of how the exploration of a particular technical reorganization can illuminate its connections with other major processes of social change.

We have already touched, in considering the basis of changing class-relationships, upon a key aspect of political history; and the biography of labour leaders can be taken as another. But oral sources have a much more general relevance to political history. There is a strong case for their more extensive use in the historical study of the political attitudes of the unorganized, quiescent majority of the population. Neglect of this has meant that we still have only the sketchiest understanding of working-class Conservatism in Britain, despite its key role in political history. Similarly, oral evidence can provide much missing information on the attitudes of the rank and file of the parties: their reading, their social backgrounds and occupations, and so on. That reconstructions of political organizations at the grass roots level are possible, even where documentation is by definition

inadequate, can be shown from the studies of underground political movements during the Second World War The outstanding examples are the local studies of the Partisans in north Italy, and the international research on Jewish resistance under the Nazi regimes, which now centres on Yad Washem in Jerusalem These enterprises have however been responses to rare national disasters, which have transformed the whole meaning of political history Oral sources have more commonly been used for two much more limited purposes

First, there are studies of very recent political events which cannot possibly be satisfactorily analysed through written records This has been a typical mode of American oral history, as, for example, William Manchester's *The Death of a President*, which drew on over 250 interviews, or W H Van Voris's *Violence in Ulster an Oral Documentary* Even where such works are simply high-quality journalism, they provided vital material for future historians Secondly, there is biography Here again the most striking instances are American, such as T Harry Williams's *Huey Long*, which uses nearly 300 interviews But the method, if less publicized, is also normally used by British political biographers characteristically, in an informal and exploratory fashion Martin Gilbert's volumes on Churchill provide an excellent recent instance of the fruits of this approach And on occasion, a British political biographer finds the need to go further in the use of oral sources Bernard Donoughue and George Jones interviewed over 300 people for their *Herbert Morrison Portrait of a Politician* 'We were forced from the beginning to resort to interviews because of the lack of certain other documentary sources Morrison himself left very few papers, having burned the majority of them when moving house late in his life The official papers for the 1915–51 government, in which he played a dominant role, are also not available because of the thirty-year rule' Turning to interviews 'in some desperation . . we were rapidly converted to appreciating their enormous value They proved to be not just a stop-gap substitute for better sources, but a quite distinctly valuable source in themselves' In particular,

it proved possible to build up a much fuller range 'of perspectives and insights to the man . . . his virtues and his vices, and the extent to which the one was so often the reverse side of the coin to the other'. An early political life, so often skipped over by a biographer, could be reconstructed in remarkable detail. And throughout his career, Morrison could be revealed at work, as a Minister or in local government, through 'the various groups of people on whom he made an impact: his political associates, his political opponents, the civil servants working with him, the people at the grass roots who were supporting him or on the receiving end of his policies'.[4] The result, it can be added, is a biography which is not merely unusually satisfying in itself, but has also created significant new historical source material for the future.

The concerns of political history extend beyond domestic events and biographies—very obviously in the case of Britain, which in the early twentieth century was an imperial power controlling a quarter of the world's surface and a colonial population of some 400 million people. There are several large-scale American and British projects collecting oral evidence in the field of military history. Once again, they are particularly important in illuminating ordinary experience, like 'life on the lower deck' of the navy, in the barrack-room, or of the black soldier on the Second World War battlefields. Similarly, they can provide otherwise unobtainable information on anti-war activities by conscientious objectors, passive resistance, sabotage, or outright mutiny within the forces. Parallel enterprises in colonial history concern themselves with the civil adminstration. The Cambridge South Asian Archive has focused on India, the Oxford Colonial Records Project on Africa. The fascination of this type of colonial social history has become widely known through Michael Mason's radio programmes on the British in India, and their printed sequel, Charles Allen's *Plain Tales From the Raj*. Through them, as in no other way, one may enter the strange, caste- and class-ridden world of the imperial white élite: the messes and homes of the officers and soldiers of the Indian Army, the pilots of the Calcutta river,

the 'heavenborn' of the Indian Civil Service, their brothels, mistresses, and 'Memsahib the Wives and Daughters of the Raj'

This is but one side of the story The other concerns the people who were themselves colonized Here, so far chiefly for political history, but potentially equally for social history, oral sources play a crucial role Documentation, although certainly present, is much less prolific than that of societies which became literate earlier, while on the other hand an evident abundance of oral source material still remains It has been systematically used by historians of Africa since the 1950s, with an increasingly sophisticated methodology, including the development of special techniques for the establishing of chronologies of oral traditions which quite often reach back to the sixteenth century, and in some cases still further Although the method has normally been most effectively used for the political history of relatively strongly organized African kingdoms, particularly in the period preceding their nineteenth century colonization, it has also proved possible to reconstruct much more diffused local political systems, such as those of Uganda, back into the eighteenth century Notable recent examples of African political history directly based on interview field work include David Cohen's *The Historical Tradition of Busoga*, A D Roberts's *A History of Bemba*, and Steven Feierman's *The Shambaa Kingdom* It also has great potential for the development of African social history especially in combination with the direct life story evidence of the more recent past, which has already been used for the political history of nationalist movements

For it is in social history, to which we now turn, that the relevance of oral evidence is most inescapable My own *The Edwardians the Remaking of British Society* was originally conceived as an overall reassessment of the social history of the period, rather than a field-work venture But I fairly soon discovered that although there was a wealth of printed publications from the early twentieth century, including numerous government papers, and some pioneering sociological studies, much of what I wished to know was either

is clearly not within the means of an individual scholar The characteristic contribution of oral evidence has thus been not the essay in general social history, but the monograph, in various distinctive areas

The first is rural social history We have already seen how the way here was led by George Ewart Evans His books are in their special way unsurpassable direct yet subtle intertwinings of agricultural and economic history with cultural and community studies, portraits of individuals, and stories In one section he may explore the contrasting social structure of an 'open' Suffolk village like Blaxhall of *Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* with the paternalistic Helmingham of *Where Beards Wag All* In another, with the eye of an anthropologist, he will suggest the significance of some superstition or tale concerning animals, or an odd dress custom like the 'breaching' of boys on leaving behind the long hair and petticoats of infancy Perhaps best of all is his feeling for the life and the speech of the East Anglian farm labourer Now and then he will point to the very particular quality of its syntax, its humour, its directness, and there is always the same care shown in his transcripts In all these ways he sets an exacting standard for what has become one of the best known areas for oral history It is perhaps hardly surprising that when Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield Portrait of an English Village* made an international literary success of Suffolk oral history, it was with less careful scholarship Despite its title, *Akenfield* consists of life stories from several villages rather than a portrait of a single community, while in detail not only the language of the transcripts, but even its attachment to particular informants, cannot be trusted The census of 'work in the village' also turns out to be an invention But if as a model for sociology or history *Akenfield* has cut too many corners, it has proved indisputably successful in popularizing a new form of rural literature, a cross between the interview documentary and the novel Nor can there be any doubt that oral evidence constitutes its real strength Thus although the book opens with an idyll of cottages around the parish church, the hard reality of a village labourer's life at once breaks through with the first section of recollections by the

older farm workers. It also becomes possible to see the community from conflicting standpoints, both of generation and of class, as one hears in turn farm labourer and farmer, vicar and gravedigger, Tory magistrate and Labour agent. Above all, it succeeds through the immediacy with which the spoken word confronts a reader with the presence of the people themselves.

Akenfield has therefore, despite particular—and avoidable—defects, proved a stimulus to oral history for essentially the right reasons. It has been followed by other community studies, often pushing rural history well beyond the concerns which were possible when only documentary evidence was employed. Raphael Samuel's fine study of Headington Quarry concerns a squireless hamlet of migrant farm workers, diggers, builders, pedlars, poachers, and washerwomen which is largely undocumented just because it was so egalitarian and ill-controlled, but, he argues, an essential and far from uncommon element in the nineteenth-century rural social economy. Oral evidence also allows a much fuller treatment of women in rural history. Mary Chamberlain's *Fenwomen* is a village study, influenced by *Akenfield*, but drawn entirely from the evidence of women, and again revealing an often harsh reality in a community in which 'men were the masters': in family and school, courtship and childbirth, chapel and village society, in service, whether in the kitchens, or out weeding on the windswept black-earth fields. Here again, the use of oral sources brings at once a new dimension to history.

All these examples come from the southern and eastern countryside of England: the region of arable farming and hired labourers. The family farm regions of the north and west attracted scholars concerned for oral evidence much earlier: collectors of literature and folklore, especially in Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, but also sociologists and anthropologists. The result has been a series of outstanding community studies from C. M. Arensberg and S. T. Kimball's *Family and Community in Ireland* (1940) onwards, all based on oral field-work. Two of the most stimulating are W. M. Williams's successive books on *The Sociology of an English*

Village: Gosforth in Cumbria—and the Devon village of *Ashworthy*. In the first, his emphasis is on the recent erosion of a traditional, stable social system; but in the second he argues that rural society was always in flux, readjusting from external pressures, economic, technological, or political, as well as from the rise and fall of individuals and their families. James Littlejohn's *Westrigg* is also particularly relevant, because it provides a successful model for a community oral history as an alternative to *Akenfield*: a very effective analysis of the changes in local class-structure during the past sixty years, as farmers have bought their own holdings from the old landowning class, and the former dominance of the sheep-farming economy of the Scottish borders has given way before the advance of forestry. And in another study, Ian Carter seeks to explain why farm workers in north-east Scotland, in contrast to their English equivalents, were not deferential in their social attitudes—yet failed to unionize. Social historians of these regions are now using oral sources too. In the Scottish Highlands, for a social history of the island of Tiree, Eric Cregeen has used oral sources not only as his major evidence for the beliefs and customs of the people, and for their accounts of the conflicts between the landowner and his factor and the community of crofters, and to balance the documents of an agriculturally 'improving' landlord with the continuing working system on the land; but more astonishingly, to build up a picture of personalities, family relationships, occupations, and migrations from the mid-nineteenth century, with the result that the bare listings of the 1851 census are not merely enriched and interconnected, but given a time dimension, so overcoming one of their most serious limitations as historical evidence. David Jenkins was also able to draw on some remarkably detailed oral information for his *The Agricultural Community in South West Wales at the turn of the Twentieth Century*, allowing him to construct a meticulous and stimulating account of a local system of the division of labour and status which included, besides the wage-relations normal between farmers and servants, a type of 'work-debt' or labour service at the corn harvest taken in return for the provision of cottage, [illegible]

The potential impact of oral evidence is equally strong if we turn from rural to urban history. Here, however, it has so far generally produced new source material, rather than new forms of analysis. Perhaps the most obvious exception is R. Hoggart's classic study of the impact of magazines, films, and the other mass media on the culture and moral relationships of the working-class city community. *The Uses of Literacy* draws heavily on Hoggart's own recollections over forty years of a childhood in northern England. It is more explicitly oral history—one chapter is headed 'An Oral Tradition: Resistance and Adaptation: A Formal Way of Life'—in its attempt to examine working-class speech conventions in relation to social change. Hoggart's influence here, however, through his emphasis on the limitations of working-class speech, proved as much a handicap as a help, and still has its ramifications in oral history. It has provided an explanatory theme for Jeremy Seabrook's depressing studies of the prejudice and narrowness of the urban working classes, *The Unprivileged* and *City Close-Up*. Both of these are partly historical, the first an autobiographical family view from Northampton, the more recent from the northern mill-town of Blackburn; and if a useful counter to cosy romanticism, they seem too much shaped by bitter comment and tendentious interviewing by the author. Hoggart's theme was also taken up by educationists and the doctrine that working-class speech was a crushing impediment to understanding developed by Basil Bernstein from this basis. But more typical of the urban history source material now being generated through oral recording is the local community history. Two of the best recent instances of community histories as self-contained booklets are, however, American: *Steveston Recollected*, an account of a Japanese–Canadian fishing town on the fringe of Vancouver, published by the British Columbian Provincial Archives, and the Boston Bicentenary Neighborhood History Series, produced by a series of fifteen neighbourhood committees across the city, which combined library research with locating photographs and interviewing residents. Both illustrate the characteristic value of oral evidence in providing an urban history source from another

standpoint for Steveston, that of an ethnic minority group in the city, for a Boston neighbourhood like *The South End*, a record of how a community viewed its own—eventually successful—struggle to win a reprieve from wholesale slum clearance and redevelopment There are vivid images of the detail of urban life—lodging houses, bars, prize fighters, and drunks—and the key connecting threads of migration and work

The richness of this evidence, both for British and American cities, would now be disputed by few urban historians Indeed, the great two-volume *summa*, Michael Wolff and H J Dyos's *The Victorian City*, included a chapter of portraits from four British cities drawn from my own interviews for *The Edwardians*, significantly captioned 'Voices from Within' But the step from illustration to analysis has proved more difficult This is partly because urban history has concentrated on the big cities, and here the community study makes least sense, because even when a neighbourhood can be identified with distinctive boundaries, its people will almost invariably look beyond it for work, services, and definitions of their place in the city's social structure Because of this it might be more convincing to take a single street and follow the movements of all its people inwards and outwards However, two of the most convincing examples of urban oral history do in fact set out to portray neighbourhoods The first is Robert Roberts's partly autobiographical portrait of a very poor district in Salford, Manchester, *The Classic Slum* His father was an engineering craftsman, and his mother ran her own shop, so that perhaps the most revealing passages are those in which he analyses the infinite gradations in local working-class status and respectability as assessed across the family's own counter The second is Studs Terkel's classic in the Chicago sociological tradition, *Division Street America* This was conceived around his own boyhood in Chicago's Near North Side, where his mother ran a rooming house for single men But he found that his search for 'a cross-section of urban thought' could no longer be confined to a single neighbourhood, and it grew into a hunt across the entire city 'with the scattering of the species, it had to be in

the nature of guerrilla journalism'. His people talk about both their past and the present; family, ambitions, work, politics; and they are men and women of all ages: black and white home-owners and home-makers from the window-washer to the aristocrat; architects and ad-men, craftsmen, the hot-dog man, the men's mag girl; the Republican precinct captain cab-driver, bar landladies and the police; and the migrants—Appalachians, the Puerto Rican nightwatchman, the Greek pastry shop-owner, Jesus Lopez the steelman *Division Street*, vibrant with the class, racial, and cultural variety of that struggling city, is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of oral history.

The great cities have drawn the attention, if only because their social problems have been the most acute: but the majority of people continue to live in the smaller towns. Although much more manageable subjects for community studies, sociologists and oral historians have so far taken little interest in them. Margaret Stacey's pioneering sociological study of *Tradition and Change: A study of Banbury* (1960) still stands almost alone, although there has been another study on the same subject more recently. Some local small town histories exist drawing on interview evidence, but until very recently there were few of distinction. This alone makes Melvyn Bragg's oral history of Wigton in Cumbria, *Speak for England*, an important landmark. The social change in this part agricultural and part industrial town, is set out through the voices of a cross-section of its people: miners and farmers, dog breeders and pigeon fanciers, councillors, schoolteachers, housewives, and shopkeepers. There are patchwork sections on particular periods: the Edwardian days dominated by the Big House on the hill with its peacocks; the young men who went to the First World War to fight under colonels who called them 'rubbish' and returned to the bewildered disillusionment and unemployment of the twenties; the beginning of better times for many ordinary people at the end of the thirties, and the subsequent post-Second World War move towards much greater comfort, security, and leisure. Another section focuses on Wigton's chief factory, from its first keen pioneers to a present in which

the labour organizer has become personnel manager, and a disillusioned shop-floor worker can harangue the 'rat-race'

such characters as Dickie Lowther, semi-crippled ex-valet to the aristocracy, griffon-breeder, Scoutmaster, and ritualist But in significant contrast to the city oral history, the tones of Wigton are generally less spectacular The quiet push of working class people towards improvement which they document is perhaps thus all the more significant for the urban historian

Some of the most telling sections of *Speak for England* concern the social history of culture—religion, education, and leisure This is another area in which the use of oral evidence has already made a considerable impact We have referred earlier to work on the social history of religion In the history of education the major contribution has so far been made by sociologists, such as Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden in their classic *Education and the Working Class*, based on life-story interviews from their own town of Huddersfield The linguistic oral studies related to education have also helped to fill the gap until recently left by dialect studies, which often collect source material of considerable historical value, but have concentrated on rural communities More recently, especially in the United States, there has been a growing interest in urban language and oral modes As a result, studies of urban folktales and folklore have been added to the already numerous publications concerning rural superstitions, tales, and crafts Of these rural studies, a particularly compelling and imaginative blend of social history, folklore, and anthropology is offered by George Ewart Evans and George Thomson's *The Leaping Hare* An earlier classic, again very much on its own, is Iona and Peter Opie's *The Lore and Language of School Children*, which revealed an astonishing historical depth of oral tradition surviving in the contemporary school playground There is, however, a more extensively developed academic scholarship in the
folk song, so that the social historian is now

only with studies of its general historical context, but also accounts of particular genres and social and musical biographies of individual singers. At the same time, a powerful case has been made for the use of both traditional song and its urban music hall sequel for the understanding of working-class ideology as, for example, in attitudes to marriage, sex, or class. There has also been a shift from the once overwhelming preoccupation with the 'traditional' element in working-class culture. Here sociologists have again been influential through their studies of urban working-class leisure forms like, for example, the northern industrial bands portrayed by Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden in *Working Class Community*. Since such leisure activities rarely leave many records, they cannot be seriously examined without oral evidence. There have been recent oral history studies of particular leisure forms such as jazz bands, kazoo bands, fairs, and baseball, and also of the role, more extensive in its social historical ramifications, of the public house.

Leisure, whether as a means of courting to the unmarried, or of escape from home to public house of the married man, leads towards family history. In this area of social history the impact of oral evidence is especially important, enabling the historian to consider critical questions which were previously closed. The most striking early examples were provided by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, whose deeply moving portraits of Mexican families, such as *The Children of Sanchez* (1961), are rightly famous. But many of the most notable community studies have been as much concerned with family, as titles such as *Family and Community in Ireland*, *Family and Kinship in East London*, or *The Family and Social Change: a Study of Family and Kinship in a South Wales Town*, demonstrate; and these, like the family sociology of Lee Rainwater's accounts of American working-class marriage in *And the Poor Get Children*, also depend on rich life-story evidence. Nevertheless, in his powerfully argued attempt to disentangle the causes for the declining size of middle-class families in late nineteenth-century Britain, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (1954), J. A. Banks could only cite the opinions of medical specialists, novelists, and other writers, but for all

published in Sherna Gluck's *From Parlor to Prison: Five American Suffragettes Talk About their Lives*; and we have already noticed Mary Chamberlain's *Fenwomen*. In Britain research has also begun on the leadership and the rank and file of the women's movement in the early twentieth century, as well as women in labour and socialist politics; women in agriculture, textiles, and London industry; and women at home and in the family. And much more will certainly follow.

For the social history of any minority group the limitations of written documentation are such that the use of oral sources introduces an entirely new dimension to the subject. This is equally true, for example, of the history of the American Indians, or of the gypsies in Europe: both persecuted minorities, misleadingly documented by a hostile majority, but preserving their own strong oral tradition, through which a more understanding approach to their past becomes possible. These two groups have in fact attracted just this kind of study for a long time. More recently, there have been studies of Chinese and Japanese communities in North America. And its possibilities have been recognized for Jewish history. They also apply to the historical study of deviance, although no historian has yet followed the example of Tony Parker and Robert Allerton's autobiography of a professional criminal, *The Courage of His Convictions*, or the equally remarkable life-story of a Norfolk poacher, *I Walked By Night* (1935), written for her questions, which puts Lilias Rider Haggard among the pioneers of British oral history. There are two forms, however, in which the history of minority groups has been taken further. The first is the study of immigration. The example here was provided by the interview field-work of sociologists from the Chicago school onwards, but normally this has been to examine the problems of immigration as a form of social pathology. More recently both sociologists and historians using oral sources have moved towards a more balanced approach in historical work, examining the ordinary experience of immigration, the process of finding work, the assistance of kin and neighbours, the building of minority community institutions, and

the continuance of previous cultural customs, as well as problems of racial tension and discrimination, makes for a much more balanced approach It can also suggest—particularly by setting the direct evidence of personal experience against the generalized message of the community's own oral tradition—how distorted are some of the commonly held explanations of immigrant social patterns in terms of racial or cultural inheritance rather than the simple economic of class factors

The second form is black history in Britain, perhaps still a branch of the first, but in the United States decidedly distinct It offers a cluster of outstanding works with which to conclude our exploratory survey of the achievement of oral history We may usefully at this point step back and ask, what is distinctive about them as history? What do they do, which could not otherwise have been done? Three things First, they penetrate the otherwise inaccessible Two come from the great city ghettoes of urban America Paul Bullock's *Watts, the Aftermath*, is an account of a mass confrontation in Los Angeles, while Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* has few equals for conveying the bitter richness of city life or as a powerful portrait of an individual leader Nor did the illiterate rural black communities leave records for future historians William Montell's *The Saga of Coe Ridge* is the leading American example of a serious fully documented community study by its subject largely dependent on oral evidence an account of a black colony, settled on a remote hill spur after emancipation from slavery, surviving at first through subsistence farming and lumbering, but degenerating through lethal fights with neighbouring whites over women, and driven as natural resources became exhausted into moonshining and bootlegging, so that eventually it was broken up by the county sheriff's revenue men Secondly, where records do exist, oral evidence provides an essential corrective to them This is especially true of the old rural South—where history matters, as nowhere else in America, because it is employed to justify or deny the claims of white supremacy It was thus no mere accident that the rich interview material which had been collected in the

1930s from former plantation slaves and their dependants remained unused by historians for more than three decades. This has now been remedied, not only by full publication of the slave narratives in eighteen volumes edited by George Rawick—thus constituting the most important collective autobiography yet published—but also by the admirable interpretative essay, *From Sundown to Sunup, The Making of the Black Community*, which constitutes an introductory volume. And similarly—to narrow the focus to a single case study to which we will need to return—Lawrence Goodwin was only able to discover, through oral evidence, the true story deliberately concealed by contemporary newspapers and records of how the white upper class used systematic violence to destroy the inter-racial populism of one Texas county in the 1890s.

Finally, oral evidence can achieve something more pervasive, and more fundamental to history. While historians study the actors of history from a distance, their characterizations of their lives, views, and actions will always risk being misdescriptions, projections of the historian's own experience and imagination: a scholarly form of fiction. Oral evidence, by transforming the 'objects' of study into 'subjects', makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid and heart-rending, but *truer*. And this is why it is right to end with Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers*, the autobiography of Nate Shaw, an illiterate Alabama sharecropper born in the 1880s, based on a hundred-and-twenty hours of recorded conversations: one of the most moving, and certainly the fullest, life-story of an 'insignificant' person yet to come from oral history. By fruits such as these, one would gladly see the method judged.

4
Evidence

How reliable is the evidence of oral history? How does it compare with other types of historical source? Will oral evidence, because of the fallibility of memory, always be inferior to a document, a last resort, or can it be treated as 'simply one more document', as John Saville puts it, 'which you do not believe, but has to be assessed and evaluated in exactly the same way that you evaluate any other kind of historical evidence'?[1]

Let us begin by looking over the shoulder of 'The Historian at Work', as described by Arthur Marwick in his *The Nature of History* (1970) First he lists the 'accepted hierarchy' of sources contemporary letters, informers reports, depositions, parliamentary and press reports, social inquiries, diaries and autobiography—the last usually 'to be treated with an even greater circumspection' than the others In considering these sources, the historian must first ensure that the document is authentic that it is what it purports to be, rather than a subsequent forgery Next follows the crucial problem 'How did the document come into existence in the first place? Who exactly was the author, that is, apart from his name, what role in society did he play, what sort of person was he? What was his purpose in writing it? For example, an ambassador's report may send home the kind of information he knows his home government wants to hear Does a tax return give a fair account of real wealth, or will there not be a tendency on the side of the individual to conceal the extent of his possessions ? Or in using 'an exciting on the spot account' from an author or newspaper reporter, 'how can we be certain that in fact he ever left his hotel

bedroom? These, and many others, are the sort of questions historians must ask all the time of their primary sources: they are part of his basic expertise.'[2] We may note some minor but not insignificant details in this account. The authors of documents, like historians, are assumed to be male. Moreover, many of the questions which have to be asked of the documents—whether they might be forgeries, who was their author, and for what social purpose were they produced—can be much more confidently answered for oral evidence, especially when it comes from a historian's own field-work, than for documents. Lastly, little indication is given of how any of these questions, either of identification or of bias, can be answered. It is only in the case of medieval forgery that a specific expertise is mentioned. Otherwise the historian's resources are the general rules in examining evidence: to look for internal consistency, to seek confirmation in other sources, and to be aware of potential bias.

These rules are in practice less observed than they should be. The oral historian has a considerable advantage here, in being able to draw on the experience of another discipline. Social investigators have long used interviews, so that there is an abundance of sociological discussion on the interview method, the sources of bias in it, and how these may be estimated and minimized. Discussion of the bias similarly inherent in all written documentation is by comparison sparse. There are few guides to be found to the faults in any of the modern historian's favourite quarries.

Newspapers present a characteristic example. Few historians would deny the bias in contemporary reporting or accept what the press presents at face value, but in using newspapers to reconstruct the past much less caution is normally shown. This is because they are rarely able to unravel the possible sources of distortion in old newspapers. We may know who the owner was, and perhaps identify his political or social bias, but whether the normally anonymous contributor of a particular piece shared that bias can scarcely ever be more than guessed. Thus the evidence which historians cite from newspapers suffers not only from the possibility of inaccuracy at its source, which is normally either an eyewitness account

or an interview report by the journalist It is also selected, shaped, and filtered through a particular, but to the historian uncertain, bias For example, when Bonar Law made his famous speech to a vast Conservative rally at Blenheim Palace in July 1912, declaring he would support Ulster in resisting Irish Home Rule by force, there were slight differences in the reports of the exact words which he chose to use in its key phrases These reporting differences may have been accidental or intended Not all modern historians use the version which *The Times* printed next morning Nor, however, is it the custom to point out such variants, even in a book of 'documents', or a biography of Bonar Law [3] This instance tells us more about the historian's normal practice than its consequences, because the historical effect of Bonar Law's words was more through the newspaper reports than through their direct impact at Blenheim But another example may show how newspaper evidence can be systematically misleading as well as inaccurate Lawrence Goodwin has used newspapers and other written sources in combination with interviews in a political study of a county of East Texas, in which a whites-only Democratic party ousted the inter racial Populists from power in the 1890s It was impossible to tell from the local Democratic press either how this happened or indeed how the Populists had maintained support in the first place, and who most of their political leaders had been Goodwin was able to discover three separate oral traditions from different political standpoints in the community which, when linked with press reports, showed that the Democratic countercoup had been based on a systematic campaign of murder and intimidation Not only had the newspaper deliberately omitted the political significance of what it did report, but some of the 'events' reported had not happened and were published as part of the intimidation One politician who was reported dead, for example, in fact escaped his murderers and lived another thirty years [4] But Goodwin's refusal to rely on newspaper evidence is rare among historians—and it has an interesting basis, as in an earlier career he was a journalist himself

Most historians would feel themselves closer to the heart of things with correspondence Certainly letters have the

advantage of often being the original communication itself. But this does not free them from the problem of bias, or ensure that what letters say is true, or conveys the real feelings of the writer. They are in fact subject to the kinds of bias which have been observed in interviews, but in an exaggerated form, because a letter is rarely written to a recipient who is attempting to be neutral like an interviewer. Yet historians rarely stop to consider how far a particular letter has been shaped by the writer to meet the expectations of its envisaged recipient, whether a political enemy or a political friend, or a lover, or perhaps even the tax inspector. And if this is true of letters, it is much more so of such other primary sources as paid informers' reports, or depositions—the statements of evidence made in anticipation of a possible court hearing.

Printed autobiographies are another very commonly cited source, although here the problems of bias are more generally acknowledged. Some are shared with the life history oral interview. In A. J. P. Taylor's view, 'Written memoirs are a form of oral history set down to mislead historians' and are 'useless except for atmosphere'.[5] They lack some of the advantages of the interview, and offer little in compensation. The author cannot be cross-questioned, or asked to expand on points of special interest. The printed autobiography is a one-way communication, with its content definitely selected with the taste of the reading public in mind. It cannot be confidential. If it is intimate, it is with the consciousness of an audience, like an actor on the stage or in a film. As a public confession, it is controlled, and rarely includes anything which the author feels really discreditable. In those cases when it is possible to compare a confidential interview with a life-story written for publication, there seems a consistent tendency to omit some of the most intimate detail, to forget the trouble with unruly children farther down the street, for example, which can be much more revealing than the rosy generalization that 'Children had more respect for their elders then'. Nevertheless, just because it is printed rather than recorded on tape, many historians would feel happier citing a published autobiography than an interview.

Many of the classic sources for social historians, such as the census, registrations of birth, marriage, death, Royal Commissions, and social surveys like those of Booth and Rowntree, are themselves based on contemporary interviews. The authoritative volumes of Royal Commissions rest on a method which was shaky even when a Francis Place or a Beatric Webb was not at work manipulating witnesses behind the scenes. They used a peculiarly intimidating form of interview, in which the lone informant was confronted by the whole committee—just like a widow seeking outrelief who faced the Board of Guardians. But most basic social statistics are also derived from human exchanges and consequently rarely offer a simple record of mere facts. Emile Durkheim believed, when he wrote his classic study of *Suicide*, that it was possible to treat 'social facts as things' as immutable, absolute truth. But it is now accepted that the suicide statistics which he used vary as much with the degree to which suicide was regarded as a social disgrace to be covered up, as with the rate at which people killed themselves.[6] Similarly we know—from other, retrospective interviews—that the marriage registers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century grossly underestimate the marriage rates of those younger age groups who should have obtained parental consent to marry. The younger true rates were *double* those recorded at the time.[7] Food statistics, such as those of the consumption of different kinds of fish, were distorted by the need to market new types of fish under old names: it was common practice, for example, to sell cat-fish, weaver, task, or gurnett as haddock or filleted haddock. And housewives, if not deceived themselves, were prepared, as can again be discovered in retrospect, to serve their husbands margarine pretending it was butter, or foreign as home meat. Such considerations make the measurement of changing food patterns less certain than it might appear. Similar problems affect even the recording of physical facts such as housing. The census definition of 'a room', used for measuring overcrowding, was a social one, which determined the exclusion of sculleries, and how substantial a partition was required before one room was counted as two. But social historians,

perhaps because they have come to statistics relatively recently, much too easily fall into Durkheim's trap of treating them as 'things'.

This is true even of historical demographers. Here surely, one might hope to find historians dealing with hard facts. But take the table of 'Completed Family Size By Year of Marriage' from 1860 to 1960 confidently printed by E. A. Wrigley in his *Population and History*. This is based on various sets of retrospective interviews with mothers, and assumes their accuracy in remembering the number of live births which they had. But no allowance is made for the numbers of those children born who died in infancy or early childhood, so that the table does not measure the average number of children actually reared—the 'completed size' of family as experienced by its members. Because of high child mortality, the average size of family before 1900 was much smaller than the table suggests, and never actually as high as the so-called mean completed family size of the tabulation. In other words, 'completed family size' is a demographer's abstraction, not a social or historical fact. Statistically minded historians and sociologists have ignored this. They have displayed no awareness that while the trend in the table is beyond dispute, the actual figures—however critical for population studies—are not. They are *estimates*, which have been haphazardly subject to significant revisions in recent years by the Registrar-General, even for the years before 1914—so that mutually contradictory sets of tables can be found juxtaposed (without any explanation) in A. H. Halsey's recent statistical collection, *Trends in British Society Since 1900*.

Social stastistics, in short, no more represent absolute facts than newspaper reports, private letters, or published biographies. Like recorded interview material, they all represent, either from individual standpoints or aggregated, the *social perception* of facts; and are all in addition subject to social pressures from the context in which they are obtained. With these forms of evidence, what we receive is *social meaning*, and it is this which must be evaluated.

Exactly the same caution ought to be felt by the historian faced, in some archive, by an array of packaged documents:

deeds, agreements, accounts, labour books, letters, and so on. These documents and records certainly do *not* come to be available to the historian by accident. There was a social purpose behind both their original creation and their subsequent preservation. Historians who treat such finds as innocent deposits, like matter thrown up on a beach, simply invite self-deception. It is always necessary to consider how a piece of evidence was put together in the first place. Thus, for example, official information from School Board and County Council records would not suggest that women teachers were required to resign on marriage before the 1920s, when this became an official policy; and thereafter, would record this as the consistent practice. But individual life-stories could document quite frequent requests to resign on marriage before 1914, as well as appointments of married women to posts during the operation of the bar. The official reports of the Poor Law Commissioners on the Labour Migration Scheme of the 1830s can similarly be shown, through alternative sources, to have grossly exaggerated the figures for the numbers of paupers removed, and to have quite falsely claimed that all of those removed had found work, in order to suggest that the scheme was succeeding. And it is obvious enough that matters of opinion, such as those of Viscountess Wolsey, organizer of women farm workers in the First World War, that country girls were ignorant of basic domestic skills, could be misjudgements made from social prejudice and lack of direct experience of working-class homes. At another level, even such apparently accidental social documentaries as photographs and films are in fact quite carefully constructed. So much so that, for example, almost *all* the sound background to Second World War film is faked. And on rare occasions, one can discover how for the 'casual' family snapshot, everybody in the picture was forced to change out of their normal clothing. Not merely this, but a similar decision is made about what is *left* for the album. And the same kind of weeding shapes the public archive. The process of discarding and confusing memories to fit modern needs, which has been identified as a form of genealogical conquest in African tradition, has its

equivalent in the systematic, if half-conscious, doctoring of the record sets which is the practice of western countries. One can only refute, as thoroughly misleading, Royden Harrison's assertion that written archive sources, 'the type of evidence upon which historians set the highest store', possess a special superiority over oral material, because they constitute 'a kind of primary evidence which takes the form of pieces of paper which have been bequeathed to us unintentionally, unselfconsciously; secreted by institutions or by persons in the course of their practical activities'. Contrary to his assertion, this '*is* a matter of some superstitious prejudice in favour of the written over the spoken word'.*

There are, in fact, two quite different ways in which oral history is distinct from the ordinary source. The first is that it *presents* itself in an oral form. As an immediate form of record this has drawbacks as well as advantages. It takes far longer to listen than to read and if the recording is to be cited in a book or article, it will need to be transcribed first. On the other hand, the recording is a far more reliable and accurate account of a meeting than a purely written record. All the exact words used are there as they were spoken; and added to them are social clues, the nuances of uncertainty, humour, or pretence, as well as the texture of dialect. This is much more than can ever be found in the scribbled notes or filled-up schedule of the most honest interviewer, or still less in the official minutes of a meeting. We have seen earlier how the 'doctoring' of official records has become so accepted that even the Cabinet Minutes document less what happened in the Cabinet, than 'what the Civil Service wishes it to be believed happened'. This is equally true at the humblest level of the parish council. George Ewart Evans first became 'sceptical of official records' while he was himself a local councillor. 'Not that there was any blatant inaccuracy ... But since the time of the meeting so recorded, a selective intelligence had been at work, omitting almost everything that did not contribute to fortifying the main decisions reached.' The result was a set of minutes 'streamlined to the point of appearing to be the record of a different meeting'.!

In the same way, the notes of the interviewer seek to communicate the interviewee's words to fill in the blanks in the schedule. Or the record of an 'exchange of views' between politicians is purged of its damaging phrases [illegible]. The [illegible] telling accuracy of the recorded tape is [illegible] has been argued since Nixon trapped himself with [illegible] Watergate.

In these instances, since the original communication was oral the oral recording provides the most accurate document. Conversely, when the original was itself a written communication, as in a letter, that written letter must remain the best record. But the distinction is commonly less clear because we communicate through both means. How do we classify a letter, originally dictated to a secretary, checked through reading back, discovered by a historian in the recipient's private papers, and quoted aloud to students attending a history lecture? Or the private recollections of a person widely read in recent history, recorded in an interview, transcribed, and returned with written comments? In each case there are both oral and written links in the chain of transmission; and either can modify or corrupt the original. Nor is it always obvious which the original is.

For some historical eras one can be more confident. Thus even after the Reformation in Europe the principal means of communication was oral. People in general perceived the world as much through the sound of fellow human [illegible] or animals, and also through smell, as with their [illegible] th[illegible] on, the document is normally a subsidiary record [illegible] the spread of literacy, and the increasing use of the [illegible] the newspaper, and the book, the dominant means of [illegible] [comm]unication was through the written or printed word [illegible] paper document can then be primary; word of [illegible] subsidiary form. Today the printed word has again [illegible] displaced by a more powerful means of visual communication [illegible] the pictorial, in television and film. The visual-verbal [illegible] has thus in turn become subsidiary; and as the [illegible] increasingly replaces the letter, the original [illegible] between individuals becomes once more the oral [illegible] cation. There are of course, in each of these stages, [illegible]

between social classes, and between subjects of communication. But the main point is that the original of evidence is sometimes oral, and sometimes not, and equally may or may not present itself, after transmutations, in the same form; and neither oral nor written evidence can be said to be generally superior: it depends on the context.

The evidence of oral history is also distinctive in being normally retrospective over a longer time span. This does introduce new problems. Most other sources—whether from newspapers, court hearings, Royal Commission interviews or committee minutes—are also retrospective. Neither contemporary nor historical evidence is a direct reflection of physical facts or behaviour. Facts and events are reported in a way which gives them social meaning. The information provided by interview evidence of relatively recent events, or current situations, can be assumed to lie somewhere between the actual social behaviour and the social expectations or norms of the time. With interviews which go back further, there is the added possibility of distortions influenced by subsequent changes in values and norms, which may perhaps quite unconsciously alter perceptions. With time we would expect this danger to grow. In the same way, over time the reliance on memory apparently becomes more salient. To understand the extent of these problems we can fortunately turn to the literature of the social psychology of memory, and also of gerontology, for help.

It is generally accepted that the memory process depends on that of perception. In order to learn something, we have first to comprehend it. We learn it in categories, seeing how the information fits together, and this enables us to reconstruct it on a future occasion, or to reconstruct some approximation of what we comprehended. As Bartlett argued in his pioneering discussion *Remembering* (1932), it is in fact only through this basic process of ordering that the human mind has overcome the tyranny of subjection to chronological memory. If we could not organize our perceptions, we would only be aware of what had most recently happened to us. Immediately after an event it does seem that we can remember a great deal more than later on. For a very short time we

have something close to a photographic memory But this only lasts for a matter of minutes It is of crucial significance that this first phase is extremely brief Then the selection process organizes the memory and establishes some kind of durable traces by a chemical process Unfortunately the bio-chemical knowledge of the brain, despite its recent rapid advances, is not yet able to answer the particular questions which a social scientist would wish to ask about the memory process However, a change takes place in the micro-structure of the brain, which is certainly capable of resisting gross suppressions of mental activity like anaesthetics Then, when the material is recovered, some kind of reverse process takes place another situation is recognized, and the brain picks out the material and to a certain extent reconstructs it

The process of discarding, which is the counterpart of selection, does continue over time This clearly presents a problem for oral history But the initial discarding is by far the most drastic and violent, and it affects any kind of contemporary witness This can be demonstrated from the few studies over time that exist Let us consider first an artificial laboratory experiment conducted by Dallenbach with pictures in 1913 Because it is artificial, like most laboratory tests it provides a poor index of the reliability of social memory It is nevertheless striking that the number of errors remains more or less stable after the first few days It suggests what may be a quite typical 'curve of forgetfulness'

Dallenbach's picture experiment, 1913[10]

Fifteen students asked to scrutinize, and answer sixty questions on picture details

Days since saw picture	0	5	15	45
Number questions answered (av)	59	57	57	57
Number wrong answers (av)	8	10	12	13

There are comparable findings from more recent Norwegian and American research on patterns of child rearing, for which mothers have been re interviewed over periods of up to six years In each of these studies memory proved least reliable in recalling past attitudes, and best about practical matters such as feeding methods (95 per cent accurate

Every time we make it, it has its own characteristics.'[14] He has in mind particularly how a story may be retold differently to various audiences in different situations, and how its recall can be stimulated by re-meeting an old acquaintance, or re-visiting the scene of some past event. A willingness to remember is also essential: a feature of memory which is especially relevant to interviewing. Conversely, recall can be prevented by unwillingness: either a conscious avoidance of distasteful facts or unconscious repression. It is of course a particular interest of psychology to revive these suppressed memories through the therapeutic interview.

Although laboratory experiments have succeeded in establishing the main elements of the memory process, they provide a poor guide to its reliability, because they take place in a social vacuum isolated from the needs and interests which normally stimulate remembering and recalling. One of Bartlett's classic experiments, for example, was to ask a group of ten Cambridge students to repeat to each other, in sequence, a Red Indian tale, 'The War of the Ghosts'. The final version retained no more than a few scraps of the original. But these students had no intrinsic interest in a story from another culture; for them it was just an experiment, whose outcome proved more interesting, as it happened, because of their own lack of accuracy. But there are epic tales among the illiterate peoples of Africa which have been passed down orally for at least 600 years. These tales are subject to variation when the social needs of their tellers and audiences have changed, but can be consistent enough for the original elements to be identified by studying the structure of different versions. And nearer at hand, Iona and Peter Opie have found very remarkable chains of transmission in their study of *The Lore and Language of School Children*. Because of the very rapid turn-over of children in school, the links in the chain of transmission are much shorter than with adult oral traditions, so that a school jingle in 130 years will have passed down twenty generations of children, perhaps 300 tellers—equivalent to more than 500 years among adults. It is extraordinary, in view of this, how much survives. For example, in his *London Street Games in 1916*, Norman

Douglas reported 157 child chants, and forty years later the Opies found 108 of them were still being chanted. And among the 'truce terms' used by children—whose accuracy is presumably especially important to them—are words like 'barley' and 'fains' which go back to the Middle Ages. They originated in adult vocabulary, but have been preserved only among children. The Opies have many nice examples of both survival and change. 'Tiddly Winks the Barber' is a rhyme which children still repeat as it was originally composed, in 1878. On the other hand, a rhyme about a grenadier has gone through many changes since it was first recorded in 1725 as part of a ballad:

> Now he acts *the Grenadier*,
> Calling for a *pot of beer*.
> *Where's his Money? He's forgot*
> *Get him gone, a Drunken Sot.*

In 1907 in Edinburgh, schoolchildren were found counting out to the lines:

> Eenty, teenty tuppenny bun,
> Pitching tatties doon the lum;
> Who's there? John Blair.
> What does he want? A bottle of beer.
> Where's your money? I forgot.
> Go downstairs, you drunken sot.

Another version, in which a 'pocket' and 'forgot it' rhyme is introduced, was recorded in *London Street Games in 1916*, and again in almost identical form in 1913. And in York they were chanting:

> I had a little beer shop;
> A man walked in.
> I asked what he wanted.
> A bottle of gin.
> Where's your money?
> In my pocket.
> Where's your pocket?
> I forgot it.
> *Please walk out!*

So here is a jingle in which the original point, as well as some of its phrases, have survived more than 200 years.

On rare occasions one can show in an ordinary life-story how a telling phrase has been retained. One of our own first interviews was with Bob Jaggard, an Essex farm worker born in 1882, who started work in 1894 on a farm, leading horses. Early on in the interview he said:

Men got 13 shillings a week and when I started work I went seven days a week for three shillings.

Can you remember at that time whether you thought that was bad or good money?

I knew it was bad money. Yes, they were put on.

Did you feel there was anything you could do about this to get more money at that time?

No, we didn't, that was just that. I can tell you right start, the old farmer what I worked for, he said a man carry a sack of wheat home every Saturday night was thirteen shillings . . .

Later on in Rider Haggard's *Rural England* I discovered that he had visited Bob Jaggard's village, Ardleigh, in 1901. A week's wages by this date had risen by eighteen pence. In Ardleigh he visited a Mr. T. Smith, farming 240 acres, who had been there for fifty-one years. 'How could farmers get on', he asked Rider Haggard, 'when each man took the value of a sack of wheat; that is, 14s. 6d. per week?'[16] Seventy years after Haggard's visit it was still possible to record the Ardleigh farmer's grumble, stuck in Bob Jaggard's mind.

One can of course match examples of recall with instances of misremembering; and individuals certainly differ in their ability to remember. The Welshman who could correctly name 106 of 108 landholders sixty years previously was an unusually good informant. But a story is not necessarily valueless just because it has been altered. When a long chain of transmission can be studied, the changes are themselves evidence for the social historian. The purist may see this process as introducing 'contamination' from outside influences, such as written sources—books and newspapers—or the media. But these influences are an unavoidable fact of

life in modern societies People interpret their experiences within the culture which they provide Consequently, stories which are not literally true may be socially important because other people believe them Other stories may be of value for their incidental details, or for their symbolic meaning, rather than for the narrative itself

It is worth considering some examples of evidence which is 'false', but nevertheless significant Lindsay Morrison and Roy Hay were recently investigating a strike which took place in 1911 at the Singer factory in Glasgow With the help of the only surviving worker from the workforce of the time (aged over 100) and his son

we did piece together a story about how the Singer Company tried to break the strike According to their version, which we subsequently heard from other independent sources, the company paid the Post Office to make a special delivery of postcards to all those on strike The delivery was carried out on the Sunday evening and the postcards announced that all those who failed to report for work at starting time on the Monday morning would be considered to have left the employ of the company

Now, we checked this story as far as we could from written sources, newspapers, a manuscript history of the company, and contemporary accounts We found that there was a delivery of postcards but that they were made in the normal way and that the message they contained was somewhat different The company said that when 60% of the postcards they sent out had been returned, signifying the willingness of the workers to return on the previous terms, then the factory would be reopened Obviously the pressure is here too and the firm was making a clear attempt to bypass the union But perhaps in a less underhand way Nevertheless, and this is the point I want to stress, subsequent labour relations in Singers seem to have been conditioned more by the first version, which seems to have circulated widely and been believed, than by the second For some purposes, the fiction captured in oral evidence may be more important than 'the truth' 17

This can again be illustrated from our own interviews One was with a very old Essex fisherman, slightly deaf, a classic yarn teller, who would retell his stories with different endings He clearly exaggerated and was unreliable on

specific detail. But he conjured up a remarkable picture of the small Essex town of Brightlingsea, which forced one to ask whether in this now rather staid, small provincial town there had survived something of the urban quality of an eighteenth-century 'unreformed borough': the apprentice riots of boys from the ships who burned boats on Guy Fawkes night; the cage where the policeman put drunks, and people threw things at them; the constables who were needed to keep order in church, where all the lads went to make a row and get their girls; his own main function as a Tory Committee-man—throwing tomatoes ... This is the kind of memory, although not in itself reliable, which stimulates new questions, and the search for other evidence.

A second example comes from an interview with a Shetlander, born in 1886, Willie Robertson. I asked how much contact the people had with the lairds (the landowners)—a question bearing on their degree of class-consciousness. He told me, as a true story, naming a particular laird, a burial folk-tale which is quite widespread in Scotland:

That was Gifford of Busta. He was one of the county property owners—the laird. And before he died, he'd left instructions that there were to be nobody to attend his funeral except his own kind, the lairds. Well all these people had to come a long distance to funerals and there was no conveyance except they came on horseback. And I have been at a funeral in my time where they give you refreshments: gave you whisky, a glass of whisky, or you could take a glass of wine. Now these lairds that came to Gifford's funeral got refreshments: liquid refreshments; maybe some other. Then they had to carry the remains, the funeral, four or five mile to the cemetery. Well they were always stopping and having more refreshments. And one dropped out; two dropped out; till latterly there were only two; and they lay alongside the coffin. So they were out for the count. And an old crofter come by, and he saw Mr Gifford's remains in the coffin lying there, and these two men. He went across to his house and got a big rope; he took the coffin up on end and put the rope round him; and he took him to the grave and buried him himself. And his kind weren't to be allowed at the funeral. And he buried the laird.

Willie Robertson may have been mistaken in believing his story to be literally true; but this cannot diminish its sym-

bolic force as an answer Funerals in the island communities of small farmers (crofters) and fishermen were normally occasions for the demonstration of the fundamental equality of all before God, and in the long walk to the cemetery every man would take his turn in bearing the coffin In some it was even the convention for the better-off to be deliberately paired with the poorest But as he tells the story he draws not only on a folk tradition, but on his own political and religious ideas Willie Robertson was an Elder of the Kirk, with a strong belief in temperance He was also a shoemaker-Socialist a member of the S D F converted by outdoor speakers who came up north with the East Anglian herring boats So his story is also a parable of the Good Samaritan, infused with a flavour of Marxist class-consciousness

Memory therefore is part of an active social process Part of the oral historian's skill, in order to make the most of its resources, is to understand and disentangle the elements of that process Although such a complex instance is relatively unusual in an ordinary life story, it does suggest the need for understanding the different forms and conventions which shape not only stories, but *any* communications between people. If one can understand how a piece of information is constructed, it is clearly easier to interpret it Just as in a book the needs of argument, of shape and length, press for the inclusion of some details and the omission of others, so in the telling of an ordinary story the symbolic meaning and factual details must hang upon a form Such forms in oral sources have been principally analysed by anthropologists, and by folklorists interested in oral literature, rather than historians In oral 'literature' distinctions are made between characteristic major genres, such as the group *legend*, the *individual anecdote*, the *family saga*, and the *folk tale* Thus there is an international type list of several hundred folk tales, which enables archivists all over the world to recognize a tale, and see how the version they have collected varies from the basic type, and what influences have contributed to these changes The individual anecdote and the family history can be subjected to the same formal analysis —although this has, in practice, been less oft

particular, the way in which they are learnt needs to be more closely studied. In France, for example, village children are taken by their parents or grandparents to the cemetery to teach them the history of the family. A wedding photograph hung on the wall or a reunion of war veterans or work-mates are all mechanisms for the reconstruction of memory. But these mechanisms vary significantly between different social groups and localities. So does the function of the personal story or the family history. Jan Vansina, for example, came from a Belgian village rich in oral tradition, and was first struck by the villagers' potential truthfulness when he found that they rejected the official version of history taught in the school: 'No. This was not true. The First World War wasn't about these generals. I was sitting in the muck.' On the other hand, his own family history turns out, after sixteen years' consistent checking, to be only half reliable. The basic economic story of how his grandfather, in a situation of developing industrialization, went in for growing cauliflowers, is quite correct. But there are more peripheral parts which have either been forgotten as less creditable, or, like the family's distant origins in Milan, created from mis-memories of a visit to north Italy. 'Half these stories are not true. They are an image setting. They are necessary for the pride of someone.'[18]

The discovery of distortion or suppression in a life-story is not, it must be emphasized, purely negative; it may provide an important clue to the family's psychology and social attitudes. The same applies to the loyal card-carrying party member who cannot accept that mistakes were made; or the informant unable to recognize conflict within a community. A good historian will notice such suppression—and learn something from it. But the more that is known of the form, means, and context within which memories are reconstructed, the better the different kinds of meaning conveyed within them can be separated.

The study of the differing processes of transmission has probably been carried furthest among the anthropologists and historians of Africa, due to their special dependence on oral sources. A clear distinction is made between personal

oral histories—*eyewitness accounts*—which are relatively easy to evaluate, and oral traditions—which are handed down by word of mouth to later generations This latter process can be quite different in two adjacent societies In northern Ghana, *for example, Jack Goody has found a sharp* contrast between one centralized tribal society, in which a relatively fixed, brief myth is handed down by official utterers, and another society, decentralized, in which performance of the collective myth (the Bagre) was *intended* to be local and creative, so that it continually changes, and different versions from different groups have astonishingly little in common The process of transmission in this case has to be understood not as a failure of memory, but as essentially proliferative in character Other Africanists have tried to disentangle the process by which immediate memory is transformed into formal tradition This can sometimes be quite rapid the lives of African prophets, for example, can be transformed into myths within a space of two or three years But J C Miller, *on the basis of field-work in* Angola, suggests that in some societies there may be a point in time, as events pass beyond the reach of first- and second hand memory, when recollections undergo a marked change Accounts of the Angola War of 1861 (which is also known from Portuguese documents) are sometimes relatively accurate, with details of guns and so on, without much moral comment, rather like written documentation, but are sometimes presented as a stylized, mythical event in the traditional war narrative manner—the style of the official tradition-bearers, the professional oral historians of Angolan society, whose task was to collect oral information and present it in public performances Possibly memory of the Angolan War is undergoing transition as it passes beyond informal memory Once none of an audience can remember details of an event, or have their own perceptions and opinions about it, what is needed is a simplified, stylized account which concentrates on the meaning of the story The time limit thus marks a great sorting-out process, in which some stories are discarded, and others are synthesized, restructured, and stereotyped The official tradition-bearers are highly concern

begins to show a progressive decline, so that it becomes increasingly difficult, for example, to retain a whole set of complex numerals in the head On the other hand, the total memory store is increasing, it is as if one pushes out the other Studies of vocabulary retention have shown that while for the most intelligent groups there is very little decline at all, for the average group tested a decline of memory sets in by the age of thirty and continues very slowly, but is never drastic before either terminal illness or senility is reached Thus the problem of memory power is not much more serious for interviews with old people in normal health than it is with younger adults

With this process of declining power in all adults the recent memory is first affected Hunter writes 'If there is, in the elderly person, an impairment of central nervous functioning, this favours recall of earlier as opposed to more recent events With progressive impairment of a general neurological kind, recalling activities undergo progressive disorganization That is, recall of recent events is impaired first' There have indeed been statistical memory tests which, although in some respects methodologically doubtful, do suggest that if word associations are examined, nearly half go back to childhood or youth, and only a very tiny proportion are recent [21]

The final stage in the development of memory commonly follows retirement, or some other traumatic process, such as widowhood This is the phenomenon recognized by psychologists as 'life review' a sudden emergence of memories and of desire to remember, and a special candour which goes with a feeling that active life is over, achievement is completed Thus in this final stage there is a major compensation for the longer interval and the selectivity of the memory process, in an increased willingness to remember, and commonly, too, a diminished concern with fitting the story to the social norms of the audience Thus bias from both repression and distortion becomes a less inhibiting difficulty, for both teller and historian

Interviewing the old, in short, raises no fundamental methodological issues which do not also apply to interviewing in general—and consequently to a whole range of familiar

historical sources, as well as to those of the oral historian. It is to these issues which we must now turn. We shall explore this social relationship more fully in the chapter on interviewing which follows. Our concern here is with the degree of influence which this relationship will inevitably have on the material which is collected through it. It needs both to be controlled, and to be assessed.

The minimization of variance in answers due to differences of style between individual interviewers has long been the aim of social survey method. The problem is to introduce sufficient standardization without breaking the interview relationship through inhibiting self-expression. One approach is to begin with a freer form of interviewing in order to explore the variety of responses obtainable, and then to follow up with a standardized survey, in which the exact words of questions and their sequence is pre-determined. An alternative is to mix the two methods in each interview, encouraging the informant to free expression, but gradually introducing a standard set of questions in so far as these are not already covered. This protects the interview relationship, but makes the material less strictly comparable.

Since, in contrast to oral history, very little of this large-scale social survey interviewing is recorded, it is difficult to know how exactly interviewers normally follow such survey instructions. It is clear, however, that they carry into the interview both their own expectations and a social manner which affect their findings. For example, in one questionnaire survey interviewers asked women whether their husbands helped in purchasing house furnishings. The results differed depending on whether the interviewer's own husband helped or not. Those interviewers helped by their own husbands found this also the case for 60 per cent of their informants, while the other set, whose husbands did not, found only 45 per cent.[22] Some of the pressing and misinterpretation which went into these results would have been revealed in tape-recorded interviewing. There does not seem to be much doubt that much of the 'predictive' reliability of the contemporary social survey rests on the informal workings of both interviewers and analysts, who try to adjust

their results towards what they themselves feel are credible conclusions. When nearly all of them are similarly mistaken in their expectations, as in the famous case of the 1948 Truman election victory, it is these informal workings rather than defects in the method itself which produce the wrong prediction.

Recording can help to expose and assess this kind of social bias. But the interviewer has a social presence, even when not revealing any explicit opinions which could influence the informant. There is a widely held image of an interviewer as a middle-class woman; and most informants have some idea of what her views are likely to be. This has some advantage, because the consequent bias in response can be more easily allowed for; and it can also be to some extent countered, by showing respect for the informant's own views. But there are interesting consequences when the image is unequivocably altered. For example, an American survey found that black informants gave substantially different answers to some questions when asked by black rather than white interviewers:[25]

NORC survey 1942: 1,000 interviews with black respondents, half interviewers black, half white

Question	Response	% when interviewer black	white
Is enough being done in your neighbourhood to protect the people in case of air raid?	Yes	21	40
Who would a negro go to, to get his rights?	To Police	2	15
	To Law courts	3	12
What negro newspaper do you usually read?	None	35	51
Who do you think should lead negro troops?	Negro officers	43	22

A parallel caution between races has been noted in Africa where, Vansina tells us, the white missionaries are expected to be interested in traditions. But they must not be tol

traditions that go against their teaching, because then they will criticize them, which will harm the prestige of the narrators, and will fight against them, which will harm the whole community.[24] In Europe an interviewer with a strong working-class accent, or a man rather than a woman, can expect to vary the social effect in—one hopes—a less drastic, but comparable manner.

It should be emphasized that it is not necessarily true that an interviewer of the same sex, class, or race will obtain more accurate information. If the social relationship in an interview becomes, or is from the start, a social bond, the danger towards social conformity in replies is increased. Nor does increased intimacy always bring less inhibition. It is remarkable, for instance, how many people, when stopped anonymously in the street by Mass Observation and asked questions about sex, were prepared to answer with a candour which is rare in the most intimate home interview.

The presence of others at an interview also has a marked effect. Boasting and exaggeration may be reduced, but the tendency to conform will be greatly increased. Howard Becker, when interviewing American medical students in groups, found that cynicism was the norm, but in private most students expressed idealistic feelings.[25] Sometimes a group meeting may be helpful, for example in bringing out conflicts in tradition about particular figures in a community's past from informants with different standpoints. And in a more personal interview, a husband or wife sometimes stimulates the other's memory, or corrects a mistake. An account of the division of domestic responsibilities given in such a situation, however, would usually be much less critical of the other's part. Equally it is noticeable that a group of old people will often emphasize a common view of the past, but if subsequently seen separately much more individual pictures may emerge.

Even when others are not present at the interview itself, their unseen presence outside may count. This is a particularly important influence in any tight-knit community. The insider and outsider have different difficulties here. The insider knows the way round, can be less easily fooled, under-

stands the nuances, and starts with far more useful contacts and, hopefully, as an established person of good faith All this has to be learnt and constructed by the outsider who, in the extreme case of a European student of African history, may not originally know the language, ethnography, or geography of the community But there can be good in this too, for the outsider can ask for the obvious to be explained, while the insider, who may in fact be misinformed in assuming the answer, does not ask for fear of seeming foolish The *outsider also keeps an advantage in being outside the local* social network, more easily maintaining a position of neutrality, and so may be spoken to in true confidentiality, with less subsequent anxiety The insider's social situation is brought out by the experience of a student collecting information on her own Suffolk village One retired horseman, explaining 'how hard things was in them days', told of how, when he had a child a few days old die, he carried the coffin to the churchyard himself in the early morning but had to pay a man to bury the child as he was due to start work at six Due to the extra walk he reached work at six-thirty,

and in his pay at the end of the week the money had been taken off for the half hour he was absent The son of the farmer who deducted this money from his pay still farms in the same farm in the village today and a few days after that interview with the horseman he sent a message to me to say that he hoped he had not given me an unfavourable impression of the present farmer, as . . 'times was hard then just after the (First World) War, there wasn't nothing else he could do really, can't expect him to pay a man for work he harn't done' [26]

Andrew Roberts has emphasized the parallel handicaps of belonging to an African community

Relations with the local people may well be more difficult than those of a white student. In so far as African students have kept up links with the land of their fathers, they come back to it as a full social personality, far more subject than a mere foreigner to the moral constraints of the society If they ignore local custom in the cause of research, they (or their relations) will have to answer for the consequences. Through the web of tl

may well be caught up in conflicts which cause people to withhold information they might readily impart to a transitory white visitor. Besides, since independence, African students are rather more likely than whites to be suspected of being agents of central government.[27]

This is the extreme case of the problem, closer to the fieldwork situation of the anthropologist. One suspects that here in the long term the disadvantages of the European outsider may prove decisive. The social codes and layers of expressive meaning have to be penetrated as well as formal language itself. Even the very structure of conceptualization may be fundamentally different, and western notions of time and space misleading. 'The scholar struggling to understand a foreign culture', Elizabeth Tonkin suggests, 'may eventually realize that what appear to be answers to the question "where did we come from?" are actually explaining "why we are here".'[28] The disadvantage of the insider in interpretation, on the other hand, is rather in the ease with which a community myth can be accepted at face value. Those others, often at the top and bottom end of the social scale, who carry a different viewpoint are not noticed. Nor can the social function of the myth be detected. As with the folk-tale or the personal story, a community's myth, its common view of its own past and present, has a social meaning and value for the historian independent of its truth. It can be examined in relation to the changing occupational structure within the community, and outside of it, both historically and comparatively; and in its effectiveness in maintaining the community's solidarity. The community myth of the miners, seen in this way by Christopher Storm-Clark, can be contrasted with the 'insider' tradition of rebellion, as portrayed by David Douglass. Vansina shows how African societies may also have a tradition of rebellion, asserting their independence of neighbours; while other myths may have the function of justifying possession of land; and he advocates a comparative method of evaluation. Clearly, the ideal is to be close enough to understand, but not so close as to be unable to step back if need be.

Community accounts for one form of social bias which

differs from place to place. But within each locality there are other spatial factors which also have their influence. Thus an interview at home will increase the pressure of 'respectable' home-centred ideals; an interview in a pub is more likely to emphasize dare-devilry and fun; and an interview in the work-place will introduce the influence of work conventions and attitudes. Linked with these changes in emphasis will be changes in language. A recording in a pub, for example, will often be festooned with swear-words; cross the home threshold, and the vocabulary will be transformed. Each might again vary if the interview was transformed from a confidential exchange to, at the other extreme, a television recording with technicians, glaring lamps and a public audience beyond. Jerry Kuehl, as a producer of television historical documentaries, has found that middle-aged interviewees especially 'shape their answers according to what they think the interviewer wants. They talk like badly edited versions of *News at Ten* or *Panorama*. The tendency is to make portentous, general remarks rather than tell the stories and anecdotes which are, as far as the producer is concerned, the stuff of which popular television is made.' And although the very old and the young were more open, of some 450 people interviewed for *The World at War*, 'about one of the most obscene conflicts in human history—not one person ever said "Fuck". So much for the idea that television is the place where ordinary people tell their stories in everyday language.' Comparisons can sometimes be made of recordings made from the same person in another situation and the differences detected, even though the elements of the account are identical.[29] Once again, the historian needs to take this factor into account.

These then are the main sources of distortion in the interview situation. They are serious: but they underlie the difficulties of any historian or sociologist in penetrating social reality, past or present. For the historian it is hardly possible to measure the extent of these difficulties, except when past errors come to light. But there are a number of sociological repeat surveys, which suggest how a
historical or contemporary evidence derived f

needs to be treated with care. In one study carried out by G. L. Palmer in Philadelphia in 1943, it was found that after only ten days 10 per cent of respondents reported their age differently by one year. Again, the Opinion Research Centre in 1949 made a comparison in Denver between interview survey material and local official records. It was found that once more 10 per cent of the answers were incompatible on age, 10–15 per cent on the possession of objects like library cards, cars, and the make of car, and 5 per cent even on the possession of a telephone. This study also calls into question the reliability of official statistics. A third example is, perhaps, more encouraging to the oral historian than the organizer of the unrecorded questionnaire survey.

An experiment was carried out in New York during a survey of racial attitudes. Of the fifty respondents, eight were 'planted', and their interviews were secretly tape-recorded. Fifteen interviewers were employed, none of them full-time professionals. When the recorded interviews were analysed it was found that, out of the fifty questions supposed to be asked, on average each interviewer committed fourteen asking errors—that is changing or omitting the questions; thirteen probing errors; eight errors when recording the answers on the sheets; and then four simple 'cheats' (that is putting down an answer when none was given). One planted respondent acted as a 'hostile bigot', a type which could be expected to occur in most random samples. When faced by the bigot, half the interviewers invented half of what they put down on the questionnaire. If this is the kind of raw material which makes up the typical random sample questionnaire survey, we may well feel that the recorded interviews of an honest historian are likely, by comparison with much conventional evidence, to be unusually reliable.[30]

With this in mind, let us look at two cases in which the accuracy of retrospective material collected in large-scale surveys can be assessed. There is first the sociological study by P. M. Blau and O. D. Duncan of *The American Occupational Structure* (1967). The authors carried out a pre-test of 570

men in Chicago and tried to match their names against the census They were only able to match 137, and in less than half of these did they find complete agreement of occupation and industry between the two sources Tucking away as an appendix this rather damaging assessment of the foundations of their sophisticated statistical analysis, they argue that the discrepancies are partly due to high labour mobility in America (in 1945–6 this peaked at 12 per cent of all workers changing jobs), and partly—scarce comfort for historians—to the inaccuracies of a census at least as unreliable as their own survey They cite a post enumeration survey carried out by the Bureau of the Census to check its own results, which found that 17 per cent of the men were classified in a different major occupational group in the two surveys This is a finding which might well be better known among statistically minded historians Blau and Duncan were also able to show the differences between the census and their own survey were systematic There was a tendency for labourers who appeared in the census to be described as craftsmen or technicians in their own questionnaire, but there was not a comparable error in the opposite direction It was, on the other hand, reassuring to discover that while individual findings between census and survey differed significantly, the discrepancies between the aggregate gross distributions were much less serious It is interesting that the discrepancies, and so presumption of inaccuracy in retrospective interviewing, become *less* as the time interval increased Men were more likely to describe correctly their father's occupation fifty five than twenty five years ago For example, according to the census Blau and Duncan ought to have found that in 1930 12 per cent of the fathers were professional or managerial, and 17 per cent were farmers, but in fact far too many professionals and too few farmers were reported—20 per cent and 13 per cent respectively But for 1910, when the census had recorded 11 per cent and 40 per cent, their own findings were much closer 14 per cent and 38 per cent [31] The reason for this retrospective increase in reliability is that an old man has fewer social reasons for wishing to m[illegible] b father's occupation than a younger man On

is therefore possible for the historian to get more reliable information from interviews than the contemporary sociological investigator.

A second large-scale retrospective survey is provided by David Butler and Donald Stokes' study of *Political Change in Britain* (1969). The historical information here is less closely analysed, but it is clearly compatible with the broad picture which we have from other historical sources of a Labour Party rising rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century to oust the Liberals as the main contenders for power with the Conservatives. Of the cohort born before 1885, 38 per cent remembered their fathers as Liberal supporters and 12 per cent as Labour; of those born between 1901 and 1918, 39 per cent were Labour and only 11 per cent Liberal. These figures probably apply roughly to the 1890s and 1920s, but unfortunately they do not provide for fathers who changed their views.[32]

Another table shows that the Conservatives relied chiefly on the middle classes and the Church of England for their supporters, while their opponents depended upon Nonconformity and the working classes. This confirmation of established historical accounts clearly suggests that the retrospective survey in another field provides social information which in its broad divisions is reliable.

If we accept that memory is not so subject to error as to invalidate the usefulness of retrospective interviewing, how do we overcome a rather different criticism—that our informants cannot be taken as typical or representative? The last two studies which we have considered are analyses based on carefully chosen samples, designed to secure as representative a group of informants as possible. They confront the oral historian with a dilemma. A survey whose informants are predetermined, and interviewed according to an inflexible schedule, will collect material of intrinsically lower quality. Some of the best potential informants will be missed, and others often less willing chosen in their place; while the interview itself cannot be sufficiently flexible to draw the most from them. On the other hand, one of the great advantages of oral history is that it enabled the historian to counter-

act the bias in normal historical sources, the tendency, for example, for printed autobiography to come from the articulate professional or upper classes, or from Labour leaders rather than the rank and file Because of this, it is important to consider how far the oral historian could make use of some of the techniques of representative sampling developed by the sociologist

The historian starts with a difficulty not shared by the sociologist If the old people alive today were themselves a balanced cross-section of their generation in the past, in principle we should only need to draw a random sample from a list of their names There would remain the practical difficulty of obtaining a fully reliable list which, unlike electoral registers, is rarely available But we can be certain that such a 'random sample', even although providing the most certain form of present representativeness, would distort the past It could take no account of migration, local or national, or of differential mortality We know that people die much faster in some occupations than in others Death rates can also be affected by personal losses, such as widowhood, by personal habits, such as smoking or drinking, perhaps by personality itself Until a whole cohort of people has been studied from youth to age, we cannot be sure how far the cumulative effect of all these factors distorts the representativeness of the surviving group But we do have measures of some of the most important differences between present and past, such as occupational and population distribution This makes it possible for a large oral history project to rest on a frame which is, at least in some of its key dimensions, reliable

For our own research project for *The Edwardians*, we recorded some 500 men and women, all born by 1906, and the earliest in 1872 Thea Vigne and I wanted to select a group representative as far as now possible of the Edwardian population as a whole, so that we designed a 'quota sample' —a list of categories of various proportions into which people had to fit in order to be counted The sample was based on the 1911 census and it totalled 444 persons The proportion of men and women was as in 1911, so were the proportions

who had then been living in the countryside, the towns, and the conurbations; and so too the balance between the main regions of England, Wales, and Scotland. We tried to ensure a proper class distribution by dividing the sample into six

Occupational and sex sample

	Men		Women	
	Occupied	*Unoccupied*	*Occupied*	*Unoccupied*
Professional 18	4	3	4	7
Employers and Managers 54	16	10	4	24
Clerks and Foremen 28	10	2	2	14
Skilled Manual 142	48	24	14	56
Semi-skilled Manual 160	48	25	30	57
Unskilled Manual 42	16	8	4	14
	142	172	58	172
	214		230	

major occupational groups, taken from the adjusted census categories of Guy Routh's *Occupation and Pay, 1906–65* (1965). Those informants who were not working in 1911 went in as dependants of the chief breadwinner in the household, normally the father or husband. We had to carry out more interviews than the total 444 in order to fill the quotas, partly because some turned out to belong to a different classification than expected, and partly because not all were sufficiently complete.

Our aim was to present the people of Edwardian Britain who were alive in 1911, partly through those who survived, and partly through their children. And as a whole, the survey does succeed in this way, for the patterns which it produces by region and by class make sense. Some of the faults in the

Geographical sample

	Rural 144	Urban 200	Conurbation 100
London	X	X	
South East			X
East Anglia			X
West			X
South West			X
South Wales			X
North Wales			X
Midlands			
Lancashire			
Yorkshire			
North West and North East			X
Lowland Scotland			
Highland Scotland			X

design of the quota itself could, on another occasion, be corrected. For example, we originally failed to take account of the fact that because Edwardian women normally ceased working at marriage, the proportions of women working was far greater in some adult age groups than others. It is all too possible to fill a category in the frame locally from a single social network which might, for example, exclude the less respectable. We therefore used a variety of means to find informants: personal contact, doctors' lists, welfare centres,

visiting organizations, essay competitions, newspapers, and even chance encounter. We tried to notice the social bias which particular methods of contact could introduce, and counteract them. And there can be no doubt that the presence of the sample frame itself served to push the search for informants well beyond what would have otherwise seemed sufficient. The wholly unskilled, the 'rough' and 'unrespectable', for example, were again and again almost to the last moment socially invisible.

The quota sample carries one undeniable advantage over the random method. Since the choice of individual informants is not predetermined, there is no longer any need to force an interview on a respondent who remains unwilling, even after the purpose of the research and potential value of their contribution has been explained. Everything is to be gained from avoiding an interview which is likely to generate false material. But while it is clearly desirable to record only willing informants, there is another possible danger of going too far in the opposite direction, and recording only the exceptionally confident and articulate. Even within a particular social group or occupation, these may be a distinct stratum of leaders with their own culture and intellectual attitudes. Oral historians have recognized this danger.[33] Indeed, such informants are not merely unrepresentative, but can often prove less reliable. The more people are accustomed to presenting a professional public image, the less likely their personal recollections are to be candid; politicians are therefore particularly difficult witnesses. So are those who, through reading, have fixed upon a view of the past which they propagate professionally—such as historians and teachers. They can be the most insightful, but equally the most misleading sources. Indeed in African history Vansina suggest that the testimony of amateur collectors of oral tradition should always be avoided as 'quite worthless, because it is second-hand . . . "Listen to the words of the smith, do not listen to what the man who works the bellows has to say", as the Bushongo put it'. His ideal informant is a person still living the customary life, middle-aged or elderly, 'who recites traditions without too much

hesitation, who understands their content but is not too brilliant—for if he were, one would suspect him of introducing distortions'[34] The point—if not the patronizing tone—may be held relevant in Britain, too If oral history is to be effectively representative, at all social levels, it is not just the unusually articulate and overtly reflective who must be recorded Its essence is in conveying the words and feelings of ordinary people The ideal choice is a broad one, but firmly grounded on the centre

We may be certain in wishing to avoid interviews with unwilling informants But what of those who are not so much unwilling as laconic, withdrawn? They will give the bones of a life story to a sympathetic interviewer, but never the most rewarding material While they should clearly be included in any representative survey, what is lost if they are not deliberately sought out? This can be partly checked by observing whether their stories vary in any consistent direction from those of ordinary informants We can secure a very rough indication from one American research project, which examined how far personality changed as people passed retirement and grew old—B L Neugarten's Kansas City Study of Adult Life This categorized fifty nine respondents before and after retirement as follows[35]

Kansas Study of Adult Life
Personalities of 59 respondents categorized

	before retirement	afterwards
(a)	19 well integrated	16 socially active
		3 socially disengaged, but calm, self-directed, contented
(b)	16 of 'armored', 'defended' personality type, ambitious with high defences	11 holding on—'I ll work until I ll drop'
		5 constricted, closing themselves off from experience
(c)	13 of passive dependent type, rely on one or two people for emotional support	8 satisfactory
		5 apathetic, collapsed (widowed etc.)
(d)	11 of unintegrated type	7 dissatisfied
		4 senile

Although such findings must be treated with considerable caution, they do suggest that neither the withdrawn nor the unwilling informant is essential to secure a representative picture of earlier life experiences. The first, well-integrated group would present no difficulties. For the second and third groups, little would be lost by taking informants from only one of the two post-retirement sub-categories in each case. The incidence of widowhood, for example, is not consistently related to earlier life experience. And the last group would make unreliable informants in general. Of course this tentative study gives no measure of the similar changes in personality during childhood, youth, and earlier adulthood. If we are seeking evidence from childhood, we can assume with some confidence that there is *no* kind of family life which produced exclusively a single, uninterviewable type of personality, and is therefore inaccessible to the oral historian. Differences in personality type need to be taken into account, with, one hopes, perhaps eventually a more sophisticated measure of normal distributions, but they do not present an insuperable difficulty.

To meet the various problems raised by retrospective representativeness, the oral historian needs to develop, rather than the standardized random battery sample, a method of strategic sampling: a more tactical approach such as the 'theoretical sampling' advocated by Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Various different approaches are worth considering. There are some historical studies for which *all* the possible informants can be known and approached. For others it might be best to work through personal groups, for example interviewing members of the same family; or interviewing married couples and 'snowballing' by following up with their neighbours and friends. This would construct a picture of their social networks. In a local study, the most appropriate method might be the 'community stratified sample', in which the aim was not to secure a mirror of its broad distributions, but to ensure the representation of all significant social layers within it. Or both aims might be met, by simultaneously working with two separate samples, the second devised on the 'quota

over me, you see . . . They were just going to tip it into the hold of a boat—when the crane man saw me . . .

And then this old auntie . . . she used to chase my step-mother, because of what she was doing to me . . . She'd get a hold of us and take us away and wash our faces and soaped us all and do what she could for us. But she had to work. And always when she come back at night she couldna find us you know . . .

And this particular night, I'm asleep on her doorstep . . . But along came a lady, and I was sound asleep on this doorstep. She wakened me up, and asked a lot of questions . . . took me to her house, she carried me up, and she washed, cleaned me and put me in her own bed . . . She put me out the next morning, she had fed me, put all nice clothes on me . . . And she give me I think it was a penny . . . My father was in a close, in an entry, right facing . . . He whistled, and I looked . . . I thought that was great. And I goes to my daddy. You wouldna guess what happened. He struck me of everything I had . . . He went to the first pawn shop, pawned them. Pawned them. There I was left in the street again . . . I went back up to the woman. And I telled her my daddy had taken all off me . . . Next thing I knew I was in court . . .

In the end—although not until the age of eight—she was taken into a church home, and her brother sent to a training ship.[36]

Just as in the selection of informants there are no absolute rules, but rather a number of factors to be taken into account by different strategies, depending on the historian's main aim, so there are no hard laws as to the *kind* of information which can be most reliably gathered from memory. Individuals give, or receive, in their own way. Styles of interviewing vary, and are more effective for some purposes than others—as we shall see later. There are, of course, some common pitfalls to avoid. For example, imprecise questioning on the good—or bad—old days will encourage subjective impressions and retrospective bias; particular facts and detailed accounts of everyday events usually make much more useful evidence for the social historian. This is partly because the historian is attempting to see change from another angle; the experience of one generation following another, rather than that of a single life cycle. When old people say that they enjoyed themselves more as children, or that neighbours

were more friendly then, they may be perfectly correctly evaluating their own lives, whether or not children find neighbours just as friendly today Historians too easily forget that most people are less interested in calendar years than themselves, and do not arrange their memories with dates as markers Awareness of this might reduce some of the suspicions of unreliability commonly aroused by oral evidence

In general, one of the keys lies in mutual interest Thus a man might be fascinated by the technological evolution of the motor engine through his years as a garage mechanic, but considerably less well-informed about the upbringing of his children If, however, he found himself out of work for a considerable period, he might have an 'astonishingly good' memory of 'exactly the prices of various food items, what was paid for house rents', and so on It is true that over-interest can also present problems An excessive concern with justifying the part they themselves played, as well as too much second hand knowledge is, no doubt, one reason why politicians are apt, especially when not cross-questioned, to give somewhat casual accounts of major incidents 'My experience is that memories are very fallible as a rule on specific events,' comments R R James, 'very illuminating on character and on atmosphere, matters on which documents are inadequate' Another political historian, Bernard Donoughue, similarly concludes

The defects of interviews as evidence are obvious and well known People's memories are not perfect. But we found that providing the sample of interviews is wide enough, and providing the interviewer is himself the specialist in the field and not using some inexperienced research assistant, then it is possible to check and counter-check statements made and eliminate much of what is doubtful In any case, with biography the writer is less concerned with precise facts of date or time (though we often found it possible to establish these details through checking with several interviews) than with perceptions, assumptions and anecdotal requirements [37]

But if personal pride and political interest make caution necessary in evaluating the recollections of politicians, with ordinary people sheer lack of interest is likely to affect their

memories of national events, while pride is more likely to be a point in other areas of life. Melvyn Bragg, for example, discovered that it was pointless trying to collect information on important but historic events like Acts of Parliament or international incidents which to Wigton people were remote:

A man will talk of the Second World War, not in terms of Rommel or Montgomery or Eisenhower, but in a way in which everyone who served under those generals would understand. And poverty in the Thirties to a woman with six children would not be in terms of coalition governments and social legislation and trade union demands, but soup-kitchens, shoes for the family, the memory of a day's outing to the seaside—the common body of daily life.[38]

So in this case we come back to a detailed reliability for memory of everyday facts.

It is partly due to less interest, but also to a much briefer opportunity for incorporating them in the memory, that one can observe a *general* tendency for recurrent processes to be better remembered than single incidents. Thus a farm worker, in recalling an angry exchange with a farmer, may find the incident hard to place in time, and perhaps confuse the details with those of another similar occasion. But ask him about precisely how he handled his horses while ploughing, and it will be very, very rare for him to be wrong. A child's memories of King Edward VII's Coronation Day are likely to be much less substantial than those of regular playmates and play places. As David Jenkins observes of the village communities of south-west Wales, 'what is most accurately remembered is what has been periodically recalled and this is usually material concerning people; memory is much less reliable when it concerns events that neither recurred nor were consistently recalled'.[39]

This does not mean that it is impossible to reconstruct an event with oral evidence. But it is likely to prove a more difficult task, and unless this general tendency is understood, it may lead to serious misunderstandings. In his study of Henry Ford's development of the popular, mass-produced motor car, Allan Nevins was able to make rich use of oral

evidence in giving body to the story which he found in the company's documents For example, he could use it to establish Ford's own personal methods of working in the factory, like his avoidance of office work and letter answering, and to separate the various roles in the team work which went into the crucial Model T design But in dating the introduction of the moving assembly line, he found that some Ford workers confused the first 'genuine attempt' of 1912 with an 'episodic rope hauling experiment' of four years earlier Others correctly confirmed that there had not been a regular moving assembly line before the later date Nevins comments, as a veteran oral historian, that 'any man's recollection of past events is untrustworthy' But he knows how to use evidence effectively A contrasting case of the misunderstanding of evidence is provided by Tom Harrisson's *Living through the Blitz* (1976), which seeks to show that for wartime history 'the only valid information is that recorded at the time on the spot' In doing so, he not only fails to notice the clear signs of social prejudice and blindness, and of 'whistling in the dark' to keep the spirits up, which affected Mass Observation's on the spot reports, but also the fact that contemporaries did not always know what was happening He then goes on to show that over time many details of incidents are forgotten, or perhaps even reconstructed from other occasions or other sources This is certainly true indeed, some people can even believe that they actually saw an incident, such as an air raid, which they in fact experienced at second hand, through the newspapers or local talk Nor is it any more surprising to learn that when he published retrospective attacks on the incompetence of Coventry and of Southampton's city leadership during the strike (bolstered by the *subsequently* established fact that the mayor of Southampton had fled by train to a country retreat), this produced a series of rebuttals and counter-memories, with local aldermen retrospectively praising their own efforts A controversial public exchange of this kind maximizes bias from both personal pride and political interest But nothing in *Living Through the Blitz* suggests that we should have any less confidence in memories of

events and relationships, in the factory, the bread queue, the air raid shelter, or at home.[40]

In the end, however, while there are useful guidelines, it must be emphasized that there are no absolute rules to indicate the reliability of oral evidence, any more than that of other historical sources. The basic tests of reliability which we shall consider in detail in the final chapter—searching for internal consistency, cross-checking details from other sources, weighing evidence against a wider context—are just the same as for other sources. All are fallible and subject to bias, and each has varying strengths in different situations. In some contexts, oral evidence is the best; in others it is supplementary, or complementary, to that of other sources.

In the field of family history, for example, internal patterns of behaviour and relationships are generally inaccessible without oral evidence. The same is often true, in studying a strike, of the details of informal local organization, or of deviant behaviour such as blacklegging, or the normal devices like stealing fuel which helped families to survive with no income. The extreme case is the history of an underground movement, such as the secret Jewish organizations in Nazi territory at the time of the Second World War. Yad Washem, the great Archive of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, has collected, besides some thirty million written documents relating to the persecution and extermination of Jewish communities in the Fascist period, altogether 25,000 oral testimonies. Collection was begun as early as 1944, and, immediately after the end of the war, offices were set up in many parts of Germany and elsewhere for collecting evidence. Several of these centres are still active. They have collected a wide range of material on social and cultural life, partly in order to preserve some record of communities whose history would otherwise have died with them. Much more remarkable has been the ability to reconstruct, step by step, with the exactness and the patience which is needed for evidence which may need to be proved in court—and has regularly been tested in this way—accounts of both the persecution and resistance to it. When a large part of the Nuremberg trial evidence was subsequently lost by the

Russians, Yad Washem was able to reconstruct three-quarters of the missing documents As one of the archive's pioneers, Ball Kaduri, knew from first-hand experience in Berlin, official documentation could not possibly provide an adequate record of the activity of Jewish leaders and their sympathizers who, in order to evade detection by the Gestapo, were forced always to meet in private, and to use spoken communication only Yad Washem has indeed succeeded in preserving a history which, as he argued, written documents could never represent—'Was nicht in die archiven steht' [41]

More often, the role of oral evidence is less dramatic, complementary or supplementary, reinterpreting and filling in gaps and weaknesses in the documents The census of occupations, for example, is a very unsatisfactory record of secondary and part-time occupations Through interviews it is possible to discover how a tradesman combined his craft with running a public house, or a casual worker took a series of occupations in a seasonal cycle, or many women described as housewives took in work at home or went out to part time jobs The labourer, 'that catch all title favoured by the Census enumerators, turns out in many cases not to have been a labourer at all, but a man with a definite calling—a holder-up in the shipyards, a winch man at the docks, a well-digger or drainer in the countryside, a carrier or a freelance navvy' Conversely, as a Divisional Inspector of Mines observed in 1912, 'You may have a perfectly good quarryman working three weeks or a month in a quarry, and another time he is a farm labourer or working on some other work altogether' [42] Such complexities could not be caught by the single entry of the census record, even if the enumerator was sensitive to them And since for more recent periods the individual entries are anyway not available, in the meantime it may also be more accurate in a quantitative as well as a qualitative sense to use oral evidence

Of what value would be the knowledge that 30% of the workers in a particular plant were Polish, if we knew from previous investigations that this geographical unit was far too large to be meaningful? On the other hand, the response of an informant that a single department, say metal finishing, possessed a work fo t

was 90% Polish might be off by a few points, or even by as much as 10 or 15%, but it would be far closer to the truth than the census estimate, which would be unable to go any further than specifying that 30% of the workers in the plant were Polish.[43]

Similarly, while court records and newspapers might provide the best evidence for a dispute over common rights, or the numbers of poachers convicted month by month, oral sources could be essential to discover how the commons were normally used, or how the poaching system with its receivers, regulars, and casuals was actually organized. In his study of Headington Quarry, Raphael Samuel found oral history most useful in explaining the social structure and pattern of everyday life, least helpful in understanding a crisis, such as a political riot, and a prolonged dispute over school discipline, for which the contemporary documentation was richer. Interviews nevertheless probably do offer the best method for assessing the normal means used by teachers across the country for maintaining discipline in class. One critic of *The Edwardians*, contending that 'interesting reminiscences ought not to be offered as a substitute for a clear understanding', asserted that 'it is quite misleading to say that Edwardian teachers resorted *en masse* to corporal punishment. The debate over corporal punishment in State schools had begun in the 1890s, if not before, and many School Boards had begun to restrict its use even if the N.U.T. protested at its complete abolition. A knowledge of the N.U.T.'s journal, *The Schoolmaster*, would have indicated this.' This journal does indeed show that there was debate. And one could also learn from the *School Board Chronicle* that teachers were demanding the right to use the cane. But it is certainly not possible to gain from these documents any kind of evidence of the extent to which corporal punishment was normally tolerated anywhere, as it is from the witness of the children themselves.[44]

For such an issue—as for many others—oral sources can bring evidence to bear from a wholly new direction. And as we have seen earlier, this will often change the nature of the historian's question too. In a local urban history, for example, the townspeople themselves will press forward for description:

The shopkeeper steps out of the columns of his ledger book to become a busy, pushy man, renowned for his penny pinching ways, the rent collector comes round on a Monday morning, wing-collared and straw hatted, only to be told that mother is out, the master printer turns out to dabble in slum property, to have a close interest in a public house, and to share his warehouse with a furnisher

The miner, who from the trade union record can be seen only in committee, now shows himself at work, and with his family

Class relations can be explored at the point of production rather than by their distant echo, perfunctorily recorded, if at all, in Trades Council Minute Books, or the surviving records of the local trade union branch the workplace, instead of being merely listed as plant, can be explored as a social arena [45]

The history of the family shifts from the statistical analysis of birth intervals, to focus on child, mother, and father in the household economy and the family life cycle Both the focus, and the texture, of history are changed in a way that only oral evidence could bring about

Above all, in contrast to any other historical document, oral evidence comes from a living source If it seems misleading, it is possible to ask more And an informant can also correct a historian who has misunderstood Documents cannot answer back, but oral history is a two-way process It is not independent of documents, but can indeed lead to their discovery And living people can offer a historian more than mere evidence As George Ewart Evans foresees

> more important still, they will be able through their memories to guide the student and the ordinary enquirer to the relevant sector of the documentary maze that is yearly becoming larger and more complicated But the future student is not likely to be troubled so much by the question, *Where to look?* (a computerized information bureau should be able to deal with that with comparative ease) as the problem, *What to look for?* Amid such a vast coverage of a past age where is he to begin? The memories that men still have of that age will be reliable first indicators of where he should search, because it is in the minds of men themselves through a process of instinctive selection, that the areas of interest, that are vital to man as an 1 will most probably remain [46]

5

Projects

ORAL history is peculiarly suited to project work. This is because the essential nature of the method is itself both creative and co-operative. It is true that oral evidence once collected can be used by the traditional independent scholar who works only in the library. But this is to miss one of the key advantages of the method—the ability to locate new evidence exactly where it is wanted, through going out into the field. And field-work to be successful demands human and social skills in working with informants, as well as professional knowledge. This means that oral history projects of any kind start with unusual advantages. They demand a range of skills which will not be monopolized by those who are older, expert, or best at writing, so they allow co-operation on a much more equal basis. They can bring not only intellectual stimulation, but sometimes, through entering into the lives of others, a deep and moving human experience. And they can be carried out anywhere—for any community of people carries within it a many-sided history of work, family life, and social relationships waiting to be drawn out.

Oral history projects can take place in many different contexts, both as individual and as group enterprises: in schools, colleges, and universities; or in adult education groups, from museums, or from community centres. Although sharing many features, each context provides a distinctive emphasis which carries its own advantages and its own problems. We shall therefore look at them in turn. And because the discussion is meant to be a practical one, we shall recount the particular experience of several projects which

have been carried out recently. The ideas which follow are not just ideal suggestions, but have been shown to work.

Let us begin with schools. Since an oral history project is a complex and time-consuming operation, the first question any teacher is likely to ask is why give it a place in the curriculum at all? The educational arguments can be summarized briefly. A concrete objective and a direct product are provided for project work. Discussion and co-operation are promoted. Children are helped to develop their language skills, a sense of evidence, their social awareness and mechanical aptitudes. For history teachers oral history projects have the special advantage of opening up locally relevant history for exploration. But they have also been successfully used in teaching English, social studies, environmental studies, geography, or integrated studies; and, in varying forms, at any stage of social and intellectual development between the ages of five and eighteen.

Any school project in oral history should assist children towards a much sharper appreciation of the nature of evidence, because they will be directly involved in its collection. This may come as a revolutionary and undesirable idea to authors and publishers who dislike school projects which create their own resources, or indeed to some professional historians. But at a simple level, in collecting anecdotes and memories of how people lived in the past, how they dressed, children's games, the changing landscape—however primitive their interviewing or recording technique may be—children are collecting evidence. At the same time, they become creatively involved in assessing it. They face basic issues: when to trust or to doubt information, or how to organize a set of facts. They experience, at a practical level, history as a process in the re-creation of the past. Like young archaeologists, they are given spades in the place of lectures—taken to the coalface to hew as historical researchers. And because they are collecting from sources which have not used, they have a chance of put evidence together in a piece of history of th

printing a booklet combining photographs and transcripts, or by an exhibition which makes use of all these means together

Finally, fundamental social skills can be learnt Through interviewing itself, children may develop some of the tact and patience, the ability to communicate, to listen to others and to make them feel at ease, which is needed to secure information To interview you have to behave as an adult, you cannot giggle Children can be helped to learn to move in an adult world At the same time, they may gain not only a vivid glimpse of how life was in the past, but a deeper understanding of what it is like to be somebody else, and how other people's experience, in the past and today, is different from their own—and why this might be They can thus be helped both to understand and feel empathy with others, and to face conflicting values and attitudes to life

So much for the theory What about the practice? We can best turn to some examples of projects which have worked The first is from a primary school

At a county primary school in Cambridge, Sallie Purkis has used oral history with the youngest age groups She began with a project, carried out over half a term on two afternoons a week, with a first-year (five-year olds') class of twenty children It was a diverse group some of the children came from abroad, and while nine children could not read, others were very bright The project was to be their first ever experience in learning history One of its objectives was to make this first encounter exciting and interesting, and to get the children to feel that they could collect historical evidence, and that history was real, and relevant to their own present It was an advantage that the project was carried out in a school without subject boundaries, so that she could launch easily into art work, English, and outside visits

She chose as a concrete starting point a photograph, suggested by a local librarian, of the school itself sixty years earlier, just opened, with its first pupils standing among the builders' rubble The children were immediately interested by this commenting on the pupils' clothes They worked out where the photograph had been taken from, and how old

these first children would now be—in other words, as old as their own grandparents. Following this, 'grandma' was chosen as the key symbolic figure of the project (aunts or other relatives could be substituted)—and it turned out that it was a novel experience for *grand*parents to be involved in the school. Tape recorders were not used, but a written questionnaire was sent out. It was composed after discussion with the children, and, in retrospect, was too long, for it produced more material than could be organized satisfactorily—a few questions would have been quite sufficient. Most but not all of the grandmas responded, and one child, who called himself a 'historian' by the end of the project, interviewed three people. Another produced a typescript. There was thus an abundance of good material.

Sallie Purkis made a reading book for the class by selecting extracts on particular topics and writing them out herself. The first topic was 'What Grandma Said About Clothes'—men's clothes, women's clothes, and shoes—one child's grandfather was a shoemaker. The children drew these. They also brought in photographs, often very precious, so that they had to be protected in plastic; these made a big show, and the children proudly identified with them. Then objects began to be brought in—garments, irons, and so on. Some of them were rather overwhelming, like 'the hat my father wore at grandfather's funeral', in a big box marked NOT TO BE OPENED. Some of the children went on to reading (although it was difficult to find suitable books for this age group). Other children made a model clothes shop out of shoeboxes. The class went on a museum visit. All the children wrote essays—on shopping for clothes, on washing day; and on 'Grandma Day'. For the climax of the project without doubt was Grandma Day: the afternoon when, to their own very apparent enjoyment, the grandmas were invited up to school for talk and tea with the children.

Next, we can look at some projects with older children. At a middle school (nine to twelve-year-olds) in the New Town of Milton Keynes, for example, where the system of team teaching is used, Chris Stafford carried out a local history exhibition project. Children opted for the project, so that

they started with some interest in it They drew up through discussion a quite ambitious list of questions, on leisure, home, and school, and took these to informants, whom they found themselves When the first recordings were made, they were played back to groups in the class, who would ask questions about what had been said, and the child who had made the recording would then go back to the informant One outstanding informant, discovered by a child whose normal commitment to schoolwork was notably low, was a retired Wolverton railway worker, who was provoked to further memories by being supplied with a locally published autobiography with which he disagreed, Bill Elliott's *Pianos and Herrings* This resulted in a lively argument about religion Extracts from tapes, along with sections of transcripts, and family trees and retrographs, were put into the exhibition Locally, the exhibition proved a considerable success, and the Wolverton railwayman was so delighted that he subsequently remounted his own part of it in his front parlour

At a comprehensive school in outer London, Swanley, Carlos Hood uses project work as an element in fourth year (sixteen year olds') humanities courses For example, in a summer term course on the Second World War Home Front taken by 400 children, the classes helped to devise questionnaires, and then took them out, recording answers in written form Nearly all were able to complete this as a homework assignment over a period of two or three weeks A smaller group of twenty five children then chose to go on to write up individual projects of their own, over a period of six weeks

In a Manchester comprehensive school, Ruth Frow has also used oral history for fourth year children This was a remedial class who were taking a C S E local history course partly assessed on project work They did not respond to demonstrations by experts of how to interview, but were much more interested when a voluble old lady, one of the pioneer settlers of the district, was brought in to talk to them—although even so they remained virtually tongue-tied Afterwards, however, they all worked hard on the project One carried out a tape-recorded interview with his

grandmother, asking the questions which they had worked out in class discussion. And the school truants in the class insisted on continuing with the project even when suspended.

She also played the tape from this project to a first-year mixed-ability class of eleven-year-olds. This resulted in an unexpectedly striking success story. One pupil, John Macdonald, was so fired with enthusiasm that he started his own 'Research in Old Peoples Home'. They drew up a list of questions together and he successfully wrote down the life-story of one eighty-five-year-old resident. He then went on to tape recording. He did well with his own grandmother, but he failed spectacularly with a stone-deaf 102-year-old ex-Chinese missionary, despite a heroic persistence in repeating the same question time and again. And the project came to a sudden end when John Macdonald formed a group and asked to interview Ruth Frow herself, explaining that they intended to interview *all* 'old' people.

Oral history with remedial or truant groups in schools has also been carried out, for example, in Basingstoke, and in the United States at the Pennsylvania Advancement School, where it is part of a general interviewing programme to 'turn the kids on' with a focus on 'How to live in an urban society'. In general, probably the most striking achievements with oral history projects among older children have been in American high schools. We may take two as examples.

Gainesville, Florida, is a relatively new town, in which the schools had to surmount a period of acute racial tension after they were forced to integrate by a court order just before 1970. In this context, Barbara Gallant organized an interdisciplinary programme, which focused on issues such as the nature of liberty, justice, and 'the good life'. Interviewing old people was conceived of as one way of showing how ways of looking at life could differ. The project began—after introductory talks by an oral historian and local history experts—with a general discussion in class of topics to ask, and then practice interviews with members of their own families—which provided a complete cross-section of the community, black and white, and all kinds of religion and

class Some of these interviews were then played back and discussed critically in class

We had students write a series of questions, and we listed all the questions on the board They asked very, very general questions like, 'How was life back fifty years ago compared to what it is today?' It came to be obvious that nobody was going to get an answer to a question like that, so they began to put together some more specific questions After they got to some specific questions, they worked on follow up questions We spent a good deal of time on this, and then we spent another day or two playing around with tape recorders, the ones they were going to use on this programme There were six to be used by 100 students

We divided them up into teams of three—one person would do the actual interviewing, the second person would be the technician,
Then came the prob-
recorders to thirty-
calendar up on the
board, and you say the final date is such and such, and each day that nobody puts his name down you gently remind them that there are going to be a lot of people who won't get the tape recorders on the last night It's a horrendous thing trying to get tape recorders back and out to the next person when you are teaching five other classes (But) we got thirty fine interviews

In a subsequent year she faced the still more difficult challenge of five classes of senior students, who were also attending vocational schools in the morning, and spending much of the day in bus journeys, and by the time they reached her in in the last period of the day were thoroughly alienated

Five classes of kids who hated school, didn't want to stay in school, didn't want any part of it . They had been in class for two periods they didn't want to take in the afternoon before I'd got them Within the last month two of them have been sent to the discipline school, Mountain Top, (not by me but by other teachers) because of their behaviour They have disappeared from the act Two of them have illegitimate children at home, and they have to run home and take care of them. It's not exactly the kind of group you would expect would want to go out and do a very exciting research project

It has been very interesting It has not been totally successful They would not do school integration They said they were bored

extricably intertwined Of curing burns and bleeding by ith healing they say, 'Stoppin' blood's just like drawin' out re .. You do it with th'same verse and th'same words' nd of planting by the moon

ake taters On th'dark of th'moon or th'old of th'moon—that's h'last quarter, they make less vine, and on th'light of th'moon hey makes more vine and less tater ... Th'Lord put th'signs iere for us t'go by. It's all in th'Bible th'signs of th'stars, moon, un, and all You've got to follow all these signs if you do right. Don't you know the signs?

To get schoolchildren to bring together material of this quality in a regular quarterly magazine, even after winning the confidence of the people of old mountain communities, has taken great organizing skill and imagination over several years—especially when it remains, as any oral history project must, just one aspect of a school's programmes, exciting some pupils, but by no means all

Eliot Wigginton starts with a relatively brief preparation for interviewing in the classroom

We illustrate, for example, the need for a tape recorder by telling a short story in the class, and then the next day without telling them the reason for telling the story at all come into class and say, 'Let's take out a piece of paper and a pencil and retell that story that I told you yesterday'. I use a few details, say it's a hunting story, I can say, 'When I caught that bear, I took a stick about six and half feet long, and I did this with it, and then I took a couple of rawhide thongs and I did this and I '—that kind of thing I tell a story that's got some details in it that a kid would be forced to remember You'd be amazed how off the kids are in their repetitions of that story.

This leads on to a discussion of how to get a good interview The key is genuine curiosity

The kid should not be wandering around and looking out of the window and drumming on the floor ... You may get into an interview situation that you expected to take a half an hour and it may in fact go into four hours if somebody gets cranking They've got to be curious ...

You tell them that the cardinal sin of interviewing is to get into a question-and answer pattern ... get one sentence or two sentence

responses and then ask another question on a totally different subject . . . What you want an informant to do is to get onto a topic and then begin to expand, and inside that expansion all kinds of things happen. You try to get the kids to ask the same question a hundred different ways. You know, 'How did you do so-and-such? Well, did anybody else in your house do it differently?' You keep them beating around inside that topic as much as possible—'Have you ever heard of it being done in another way?' Then if possible you give the kids some information before they go out on a topic that they can carry with them, like other alternative means of doing something . . . (And) you have to remind the kid that he can't cut off the people once they get going. If they start telling stories . . . bear hunting stories, the worst thing you can train a kid to do is cut him off and say, 'No, wait a minute! I don't want bear stories. I want how to tan a hide . . .'

This preparatory stage is kept quite short. As soon as possible pupils are sent out into the field for their first interview. They go for the first time either with a staff member, or another more senior and experienced pupil. Initial interviews are set up in advance, to make sure that the experience is with a sympathetic informant. Once the children become more confident, they go out into the field on their own without any staff members. And they begin with relatively small topics—'how one woman made soap, smaller things of that sort'—and gradually work up to bigger topics.

Eliot Wigginton's most remarkable achievement, however, is in devising an organization for publication which makes the fullest possible use of the material which the pupils collect:

We do many kinds of articles. I'll give you a few illustrations. We got a call from another magazine one time that said, 'We're doing an article on various ways that you can tell what the weather is going to be like this year . . .' We had six or eight in a file, and we said, 'Okay, I'll tell you what. You call us back at 3.30 this afternoon and we'll have something for you'. You take two class periods and just about every kid who is working on the magazine—fifty-five kids—and you say, 'Okay, you guys right there, you take Kelly's Creek. You guys take Betty's Creek, etc., and you go out and ask everybody you run into what weather signs, what specific weather signs they can remember, and you be back here in an hour and forty-five minutes.' We got something like 110

weather signs in an hour and forty five minutes that we never even suspected existed, and those appeared on three or four pages inside *The Foxfire Book*

Another kind of interview we do is the personality type interview We usually feature one person in each issue In this particular issue it s a woman named Ada Kelly, who's a grandmother that lives in our section The kids who are responsible for the Ada Kelly article go back and interview her at least three or four times The kids will organize all that together and present it Meanwhile, if the folklorist wants to see all of the original material, we have all the original transcripts plus all the original tapes .

With an ongoing organization, it becomes possible for each successive year of pupils to help not only each other, but following years They are encouraged to choose their own subjects But very often they collect much more than they need for their own purposes

He may have gone out for ghost stories and come back with fifteen hunting stories also When a kid gets the transcriptions all made and you have a carbon, he cuts out of the carbon the material that he needs for his article, his ghost stories but somebody else in the class may be collecting hunting stories He puts those together and says, Here, you can add these to your article' The guy that's collecting hunting stories may do the same for the ghost-story article, in other words, they all plug in with each other We get twenty or thirty articles usually going at the same time. If a kid comes back with a chunk of information that is not being dealt with at that time, we have what we call an 'Articles in-Preparation File' Then next year, if a kid wants to pick up that subject and carry it on he can pick up that interview and go on with it. So all the material gets utilized, all of it gets used in one way or another

Eliot Wigginton's *Foxfire* project is undoubtedly a remarkable enterprise, an example which needs to be thought about very closely There can be no doubt that for many pupils involvement in it proves a transforming experience As one puts it

I've learned through *Foxfire* to express myself and communicate Then by actually teaching a younger kid how to do something I ve learned to appreciate the value of teaching and become

excited when I see the kid's eyes light up . . . Then more significant than that, I've learned to appreciate the value of people working together, people being dependent on each other . . . It's made a difference in my life.[2]

So much for examples of projects which have worked. But for the teacher who is considering just starting, this very success may seem daunting. What about the normal problems which can be expected in an oral history project?

First, there are those of organization. Oral history work is essentially a small group activity, and difficult to organize in large classes. Some problems can be overcome by advance preparation—for example, by making pre-interview contact with old people, groups of children can be sent out interviewing while others are discussing material already collected in the class. But there can be no doubt that projects benefit greatly from situations in which teaching is organized on a team basis, or the curriculum favours inter-disciplinary work—and it is perhaps an argument for them that they point to fundamental issues in school organization.

Secondly, there is the question of equipment. Oral history work does not depend on the existence of recorders, although it can be much more fully developed with them. If the school's policies towards equipment and its use are generous, it is certainly feasible to teach children the mechanical skills of handling them. Indeed, with the most recent cassettes which incorporate automatic level controls, the technical problems are much reduced.

Thirdly, subjects have to be well chosen. They must interest each particular group of children. For younger age groups, family history is particularly suitable. It helps a child-centred approach, drawing on the child's own access to family [illegible] and documents, [illegible] at the same time encour[illegible] or grandpare[illegible] ticipate in the work [illegible] ith older gr[illegible] h wider range of choi[illegible] ons can be [illegible] nly from the examp[illegible] r, but als[illegible] scussion in Chapte[illegible] erhaps o[illegible] be given a special [illegible] t: a pro[illegible] es on the story of [illegible] It is no[illegible] to see a

boundaries or shape to local or community history in a big city. But a single street can offer a microcosm of some aspect of its history: of changes in working-class community life, or shops and trading, or of successive patterns of immigration. With the help of a local newspaper, in some cases it may even prove possible to trace some representative of most of the families who lived there forty or sixty years ago. It will certainly provide the teacher with a physical basis for a class project which could combine photography, the collection of records and topographical data, searches of archives and newspaper files, as well as interviewing.

Next, the children must learn some of the personal skills needed in the interview, which is not always easy. They can practise by interviewing the teachers themselves, or members of their own family. Or old people can be asked up to the school, although this normally proves much more successful in an informal small group, rather than in front of a whole class. Indeed there is a danger of leading children through such a demonstration to think of old people as historical objects, rather than valued for themselves. Children can also be asked to write their own autobiographies, partly from family documents, and be interviewed by another child— making sure that this does not lead into too deep a probing of personal situations, which could prove a damaging experience. They must also be taught how to formulate different kinds of questions. This can be helped by criticizing other interviews, like the teacher's own. And it is particularly important that the children's first interview recordings should be listened to and commented on, to give support as well as advice.

Special difficulties are raised by projects in racially mixed schools. 'Race relations' has proved a very successful subject in the Humanities Curriculum Project, and this involves much interviewing and recording. But historical work other problems. Many immigrant children have no parents; and their families speak either altogether languages, or in accents which English children find hard to understand. Ideally, both black and white children need to learn about their own and each other's historical cult

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Thirdly, subjects have to be well chosen. They must interest each particular group of children. For younger age groups, family history is particularly suitable. It helps a child-centred approach, drawing on the child's own access to family memories and documents, and at the same time encourages parents or grandparents to participate in the work of the school. With older groups, a much wider range of choices and suggestions can be picked, not only from the examples in this chapter, but also from the discussion in Chapters 2 and 9. But perhaps one idea may be given a special mention at this point: a project which focuses on the story of a particular street. It is not always easy to see any

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But although old white people can be interviewed by black children in clubs, racial tension and apprehensiveness makes it very difficult to arrange for this in their homes. There is also a special need in this situation for an integrating theme—such as the relationship between industrialization and migration. It is undoubtedly an area in which more experimentation is needed.

What can be done with the fruits of oral history projects afterwards? They can be mounted as exhibitions, along with the photographs and other records which a successful project will normally bring to light. They can be brought together into sound and slide lectures, or published as local booklets or newspaper articles. Afterwards, recordings can be deposited in the public library or museum. Wherever possible, a continuing, active relationship with the local community should be built up through returning to it the material collected in some form.

Finally, we need to beware against too easy success. Oral history projects can only be carried out successfully by skilled teachers in carefully considered contexts. Careless exercises could lead to considerable offense being caused, for example, by the tactless release of damaging (or libellous) information. And the advantages of the approach would be largely destroyed if over-prepared, centrally produced materials came into use. For the same reason, the final product should not aim for a technical standard beyond the reach of the children. It is essential for them to be involved at every stage in the process, and to recognize their own contribution at the end. If oral evidence becomes just another source material in teaching, its hold on the imagination will be lost.

Many of these points apply equally to projects in higher education, in colleges and universities, where there has again been much successful work in oral history.

The organization of the curriculum is here, too, an important issue. In principle, it is possible to carry out *group* projects—and not just in history. At Nottingham University, for example, an English course was devised by Sheila Smith

which took as its theme the First World War, and different members of the class combined to collect contemporary poetry, background historical information, and retrospective testimony of the experiences of the trenches and the home front In history, Brian Harrison's group project on Corpus Christi College servants at Oxford has already been mentioned In the United States, Knox Mellon, a social historian at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles, has run a series of group projects on topics such as working women in California, and the history of sport Similarly, in anthropology, Edward Ives at the University of Maine organized field work on the history of lumbering camps and popular music Group projects are, however, clearly much more difficult if an assessment on an individual basis for each element in the course has to be returned And even individual projects become very difficult when because of an inflexible system which only admits closed written examinations, they cannot make a contribution to the final degree result But raising this issue, and the need to give space for creativity within the system, is in itself a merit of project work

A more special danger is in allowing the teaching of the method to shift too far from the practical to the abstract principle Such academicism is largely responsible for recurrent unpopularity of 'methodology' courses in the social sciences The discussion of theory needs to be interwoven with practical experience, and it also needs to be directed towards specific historical issues At the University of Essex, where the M A in Social History includes a course in the interview method, Thea Vigne has taught through a workshop approach Students first learn to use the recorder—which for projects at this level is essential equipment They then interview each other, discussing beforehand what aspect of their lives to focus on, and preparing questions These interviews are then played back and discussed in class They immediately raise questions of the accuracy of memory, suppression, interviewing technique, and the experience of being interviewed They also bring out examples of the kinds of historical material which can be collected, and the complexity of attitudes which it reveals This leads on tow

problems of its use in formulating and testing hypotheses, and of generalization, including techniques of sampling.

The next stage is for each student to seek out an informant and conduct an interview on a topic of their own choice. The topic may of course be one which suggests itself through the discovery of a particular informant. Sometimes students find considerable difficulty in locating a suitable old person, and this is particularly true with a group project with its subject already defined. In that case they can either be given direct assistance, or the delay can be covered by bringing in an already known informant (of some confidence) whom they can question together as a group. These first interviews are then again discussed and evaluated. They are also at least partly transcribed, so that the principles of transcription, and the differences between spoken and written communication, can be considered.

The students then go on to mini-projects of their own, conducting a series of interviews and writing up an evaluation of their method and findings, including a model list of questions which could be used in a more extended project involving more than one interviewer. In many cases these small exploratory projects have proved the starting-points for full graduate research dissertations.

The choice of the topic is clearly critical. We have found it possible for a single student, undergraduate or graduate, working alone on a vacation project, to make a real contribution to historical knowledge through new field-work. It is best (although not essential and for some subjects intrinsically impossible) if interviews can be combined with research in archives or on local newspapers. It is also important to choose a subject which is relevant to wider historical issues as well as a sufficiently defined and *localized* theme. It will fail if potential informants are too scattered to be traced relatively quickly. Some examples of subjects which have proved creative, but manageable, are studies of various East Anglian village communities; neighbourhood and class relations in a Nottingham slum and in fishing ports; migrant hop-pickers, the recruitment of schoolteachers, and the Essex military tailoring industry; domestic economy among farm labouring

amilies, and the spreading use of birth control among various social groups; Colchester engineering workers in the First World War, and the experience of the General Strike of 1926 in the town.

The possibilities, however, are limitless. And the gains are equally clear: the personal fulfilment, co-operative spirit, and deeper understanding of history itself which can result—and beyond that, the breaking down of the isolation of academic study from the world without.

It is no doubt here—for history in the community—that the oral history project has its most radical implications. It can ontribute to many different enterprises—an adult literacy rogramme, an evening class in history, a local history ociety or a community group enterprise, a museum exhibition or a radio programme. For each its essential merits will be to encourage co-operation, on an unusually equal footing, in the discovery of a kind of history which means something to ordinary people. Of course these are tendencies which have to be nurtured; and they can create problems.

The first issue concerns the choice of topics. For a radio broadcast or an adult literacy programme the main point may be to catch interest. The local history society's notions will be more severe, and indeed possibly too limited by the traditional conventions of documentary history. A shifting of perspective will then be needed, along the lines suggested to Women's Institute groups many years back by Joan Wake's admirable booklet, *How to Compile a History and Present Day Record of Village Life*. More recently Raphael Samuel has argued for a re-mapping of local community history in which people are as prominent as places, and the two are more closely intertwined. He or she can then explore the moral topography of a village or town with the same precision which predecessors have given to the Ordnance Survey, following the ridge and furrow of the social environment as well as the parish boundaries, travelling the dark corridors and half-hidden passageways as well as the by-law street. Reconstructing a child's i seventy years ago the historian will stumble on

boundaries which separated the rough end of a street from the respectable, the front houses from the back, the boys' space from the girls'. Following the grid of the pavement you will come upon one space that was used for 'tramcars', another for hopscotch, a third for Jump Jimmy Knacker or wall games. 'Monkey racks' appear on the High Street, where young people went courting on their Sunday promenades, while the cul-de-sac becomes a place where woodchoppers had their sheds and costers dressed their barrows . . . (And similarly in) particular woods or fields . . . here mushrooms could be found or rabbits trapped; there potatoes were dug or horses illegally grazed, or long summer days were spent at haymaking or harvest. . . .

Or again, instead of taking a locality itself as the subject, the historian might choose instead as the starting point some element of life within it, limited in both time and place, but used as a window on the world . . . It would be good to see this attempted for nineteenth-century London. A study of Sunday trading in Bethnal Green, including the war waged upon it by the open-air preachers; of cabinet-making in South Hackney, or of Hoxton burglars . . . would take one closer to the heart of East End life than yet another précis of Hector Gavin's *Sanitary Ramblings* . . . Courting and marriage in Shepherd's Bush, domestic life in Acton, or Roman Catholicism among the laundrywomen and gasworkers of Kensal Green might tell one more about the growth of suburbs than logging the increase of streets . . . The study of social structure, too, might be made more intimate and realistic if the approach were more oblique, and focused on activity and relationships. A study of childhood in Chelsea (of whom you could or couldn't play with, of where you were allowed to go), masculinity in Mitcham, the journey to work in Putney, or of local politics in Finsbury, would tell us a great deal (more) about the way class differences were manipulated and perceived, and social allegiances expressed in practice . . . than a more flat-footed approach taking the Registrar-General's fivefold divisions as markers.[3]

It is this approach of seeking for 'a window on the world' which has initially allowed Raphael Samuel to catch the imagination of trade unionists on adult education courses at Ruskin College, Oxford, by getting them to explore the histories of their own occupations, and subsequently to stimulate the History Workshop movement which is now spawning local meetings through the districts of London and

the provincial cities The movement's new half yearly journal, *History Workshop*, should provide sufficient reassurance to those pessimistic enough to fear that enthusiasm must prove incompatible with scholarly standards

Its activities do nevertheless present a challenge to professionalism as such, 'dedicated to making history a more democratic activity', and attacking a situation in which '"serious history" has become a subject reserved for the specialist Only academics can be historians, and they have their own territorial rights and pecking orders The great bulk of historical writing is never intended to be read outside the ranks of the profession '[4] A similar opposition to this view underlies the activities of many oral history groups, such as the collection of songs and interviews from north Italian factory workers by the Istituto Ernesto di Martiro in Milan, the joint work of the Brighton Trades Council and Sussex Labour History Society in the Queen Spark Books series, or the groups which have produced the *Lifetimes* 'group autobiography' from a 'history less' overspill suburb of Manchester, and the People s Autobiography of Hackney from East London There is a parallel too in the neighbourhood committees which were set up in fifteen districts of Boston to produce, from library research, locating photographs and collecting memories from all kinds of people, a bicentenary series of history booklets There can be no doubt that these booklets, which were distributed free to residents in the Boston Bicentenary series or sold several thousand copies in the case of Hackney, have brought local history to an exceptionally wide audience But the spirit in which they are produced by co-operative work can be equally striking In the Hackney group there is an insistence that anyone can record anyone else, and all should contribute to the process of presentation The purpose is as much to give people confidence in themselves, and their own memories and interpretations of the past, as to produce a form of history In this context the professional, confident in self expression and backed by the authority of higher degrees, becomes a positive menace, tearing at the roots of the project Of course a complete absence of the wider historical perspectives

experienced historian can be equally damaging to a group's work. It will lead to the creation of one-dimensional historical myths rather than to a deeper social understanding. What is needed is a dynamic relationship, with interpretation developing through mutual discussion.

The success of the local group project will thus depend partly upon how it makes use of the differing talents which each will bring to the work: their own life memories, ability as technicians, knack with organizing, or skill in getting others to talk, will be as important as a reservoir of historical information. Probably in most projects roles can be best divided up within a normal committee structure. Willa Baum, for example, advises that it is much better to dissuade both 'the compulsive talker, and the compulsive director', from taking part in the interviewing work in a local historical society project:

Both types will end up with interviews of themselves. The compulsive talker will do most of the talking, in the guise of lengthy questions . . . The compulsive director will be able to guide the narrator into telling what the interviewer thinks is the appropriate account, much to the later dissatisfaction of the narrator and the non-validity of the historical information.

So use the director-type to head up the programme, and the talker-type to publicize the program, to raise funds for equipment, and to put the information that is obtained into use through lectures. Save the interviewing itself for the quieter people in the group.[5]

A second critical factor in success is the choice of whom to interview. This is of course true of any oral history project: and the underlying principles remain the same. First, there is no point in recording people whose memories are confused or impaired, or who are too withdrawn to talk about them. Secondly, what matters is the *direct* personal experience that somebody has, rather than their formal position. This is a particular trap for local historical societies or public libraries. It can mean that the people chosen to record are those very local dignitaries, such as mayors and council officials, who have the most need for caution and thus the least to give. It is 'almost axiomatic', as Beatrice Webb very correctly observed,

that the mind of the subordinate in any organization will yield richer deposits of fact than the mind of the principal This is not merely because the subordinate is usually less on his guard The working foreman, managing clerk, or minor official is in continuous and intimate contact with the day to-day activities of the organization, he is more aware of the heterogeneity and changing character of the facts, and less likely to serve up dead generalization, in which all the living detail becomes a blurred mass, or is stereotyped into rigidly confined and perhaps obsolete categories [6]

Thirdly, it is necessary to be constantly aware of the social balance of the accounts which are being collected Thus there is always a tendency for projects to record more men than women This is partly because women tend to be more diffident, and less often believe that their own memories might be of interest It is also because men are much more often recommended as informants by others Even when this is recognized as a problem, it may prove difficult to solve For example, if the subject is a local industry, it will be easy enough to find men who worked in it, indeed they may still meet together as old work mates at a pub or a club But their wives, or women workers in the same industry, although equally vital to its functioning, will be much harder to trace, because they will not normally be locally known by their occupation, and their social networks will be those of the neighbourhood rather than the work place Similarly, there is an equally strong tendency for a community project to record its central social stratum—normally the respectable working class and the lower middle class—at the expense of both top and bottom There are difficulties in tracing the retired works director to Cheltenham Spa And again and again, the very poorest, the 'rough' elements which were a vital part of the community, prove equally elusive They are not suggested as informants because the more 'respectable' old people either positively disapprove of what they would say, or simply regard them as too pathetic or unintelligent to have any worthwhile memories at all Yet they are often precisely those whose different view, expressed in dialect stories, can provide

valuable recording of all. And it is the juxtaposition of live experience, from all levels of society, which makes the most telling and thought-provoking local history.

Finding a sufficient range of informants is thus a key task. A self-selected group, responding to a public notice or a local newspaper or radio appeal, can certainly provide the best start for some projects, but it will rarely be representative enough. People can be located in many other ways: through personal contracts, at old people's workshops or clubs, through welfare workers or doctors, churches or visiting organizations, even chance encounters in a shop or a public park. It is always much easier when you can approach them with a personal recommendation from somebody else. Although there will be refusals, which can be disheartening, provided that you keep a clear idea of who you are searching for, this part of the project depends above all upon persistence. But it will be worth persisting.

We can best conclude by returning again to some projects in practice, which show some of the things which might be done elsewhere. One example is the use of oral history in youth club work. In London, the Passmore Edwards Museum has shown that oral history discussion weekends between groups of teenage children and old people can very successfully bring understanding between the generations. A similar approach by Dan Jacobs, a Jewish Reformed Synagogue youth officer in Harlow, ended up with the teenagers running an old people's club inside their own youth club. And in the Cambridgeshire village of Burwell, Kieran O'Brien, as part of a plan to produce a documentary film interpolating tape recordings, was able to institute a 'Drop-In Club', again within the Youth Club, for old people collecting their pensions from the Post Office on Thursday afternoons. They chatted with some of the youth group over tea, leading on to recordings, articles published in the community magazine, and so more offers of information.

Another instance illustrates co-operation between adult education and local radio. Dennis Stuart of Keele University's Adult Education Department conceived a project in local Methodist history, with the aim of involving radio

listeners more actively in contributing to local programmes, working with Arthur Wood of Radio Stoke on Trent A set of eight chapel study groups was formed, each examining their own records and carrying out interviews, and this material was brought together, linked by narration and live recordings of singing and preaching, in a series of broadcast programmes The programmes, and an exhibition linked with them, stimulated more recording work—and also a new programme series, which proved very popular, and lasted altogether eighty weeks It consisted of weekly fifteen-minute programmes, each composed of a patchwork of voices with no narrative, mostly on aspects of social life before the First World War—on local places, or on themes like theatres or friendly societies This stimulated very active local participation, with people sending in comments, offering to be interviewed, and bringing in essays about their own memories

Our final example is of a much more remarkable local participation, which has brought about the creation of a whole new museum in Italy This is not an oral history project as such, so much as a community history project in which the role played by oral memory was of vital importance It also provides a very striking instance of the co-operation possible between workers and university scholars, taking place in the context of a wider Italian political movement for the re-evaluation of working class culture As Alessandro Triulzi, in describing the project, argues, the Museum of Peasant Civilization—the Museo della Civilta' Contadina di S Marino in Bentivoglio—must be understood not just as a collection of objects from the past, but as 'the workers' own answer to the cultural appropriation they have been subjected to by the dominant classes', and a step towards the 're appropriation of values and contributions that have long been ignored or trivialized and distorted by the state official culture'

The museum stands some miles outside Bologna, in the hot, flat, rain swept countryside of the Po valley It is a superbly documented and socially very penetrating display, … in the elegant bailiff's house of a former

estate, of the life and work of the peasant sharecroppers of the surrounding countryside. Opened in 1973, it was the fruit of a campaign which had lasted nine years. It began in 1964 when a former peasant, Ivano Trigari, discovered an old farming tool half-buried outside a friend's house, locally known as a *stadura*:

The *stadura* is a round iron bar, fifty or sixty centimetres long, which was used in old Bolognese ox-carts both as a brake and as an ornament. The top of the bar was usually embellished with a cross or other decorations, and it had one or more iron rings which gave each cart when moving its own characteristic sound.

Trigari cleaned and polished this *stadura*, and put it on show in the window of the agricultural co-operative where he worked in the little town of Castelmaggiore. The result was astonishing: a 'fever for *stadure*' seized the town, a competition to produce the best specimen, schoolchildren bringing in examples sent by their fathers wrapped in paper, news of discoveries coming from every corner. Within a few days some twenty had been amassed, the most beautiful on display in the front of the shop, the rest piled in a corner. The collection became the talk of the town, drawing crowds of old peasants from the bar and the workers' club, the Casa del Popolo. As they stood there looking and commenting, Trigari listened to their memories, questioning them for details he did not know. He realized, as he puts it, that these oral memories could provide 'a general fresco of an epoch which had disappeared already, or was soon to disappear'. The comments varied:

Some cursed the tools which reminded them how hard they had worked in the past; others were excited, reminded of their youth. They said that times were better now, and started exchanging memories of the past, of times when they had to rise at two in the morning to go ploughing; of how they had to take their ox-carts to the rice fields to collect forage and the rice-straw which was used then as litter for the animals . . . And again of when they used to take all the hemp to their landlord's mansion or how they carried the huge grape baskets on their heads; or of the great bundles of firewood which were carried to the baker; or finally, of when, with

the best cart and oxen, the *stadura* all shining, the bridegroom went to the bride's house to take her dowry

Before long, other tools were coming in too old looms, hemp tools, yokes, hoes, ploughs, and so on Out of this grew the idea of a systematic local collection of old working implements It was taken up enthusiastically by the peasants, who hunted through their houses and in disused depots, and persuaded their friends to do the same A *festa della stadura* was started to win support, which has become an annual occasion An association was set up, the *Gruppo della stadura*, which organized a travelling exhibition, an ancient cart drawn by a tractor with samples of tools, putting them on show in nearby villages at fair and carnival times, or at the celebrations of local saints' days, and appealing for support 'Peasants would listen, and often contributed on the spot tools, money, advice, and suggestions where further material could be found' By the time that, after years of searching, the association won the present home for its museum from the provincial administration of Bologna, almost 4,000 objects had been assembled 'Based on an unfailing faith and pride in their own sense of history', the movement had developed into 'a collective effort that involved almost everybody in the community'

A key factor in winning official support had been the backing of a group of university students and researchers gathered around Carlo Poni, Professor of Economic History at Bologna Now that the first stage of the project has reached success with the opening of the museum, the close contact between historians in the university and the community is to continue The museum is building up a substantial archive of labour contracts, estate papers, the records of peasant organizations, and photographs It acts as a centre for seminars and for research in agrarian history At the same time it draws in thousands of local visitors, especially schoolchildren, who are encouraged to write their own term papers using the museum material It is also providing training for others who wish to start similar ventures elsewhere some fifteen new agrarian museums are being created in Emelia alone, and the idea is spreading to other provinces Perhaps

most interesting, for the oral historian, is the encouragement of local historical memory. Schoolchildren collect interviews from their own villages as well as using the museum's records. The interview method has also been developed by university students. And above all, peasant-historians within the community have found a renewed confidence. One instance will suffice to conclude: that of Giuseppe Barbieri of S. Giovanni in Persiceto.

Aged 78, Guiseppe Barbieri, now a retired peasant, has a poor scholastic record (he didn't get beyond third grade) but a considerable record as a local historian. His first work, a 300-page manuscript titled 'My memories in war and peace. Some family remembrances', was written in 1936. In it the then 39 year old peasant described at length this war experience, the peasants' working conditions in pre-WW1 Emilia, the agrarian struggle of 1919–20, and peasant reactions to national events, like the rise of Fascism, or to local tragedies, like the earthquake of 1929. Written in ungrammatical Italian (almost a foreign language to him since, like most peasants in the area, he speaks the local dialect both at home and work), his exercise book manuscript lay idle in his house until 1975, when news of the peasant museum spread in the region . . . Guiseppe Barbieri decided to take up pen again . . .

Barbieri's new book is to be on rural traditional structure and daily labour. It offers, in Triulzi's words, 'a working man's answer to the scholars' false dichotomy between the little history of daily life and labour and the Great History of official textbooks'. And Giuseppe Barbieri has certainly entered his task with enthusiasm; for he hopes, in his own words, 'to continue it quickly, while my memory is still good, since I have passed my 77th year already and I feel proud to express our past'.[7]

The spirit in which to undertake an oral history project could hardly be better put.

6

The Interview

To interview successfully requires skill. But there are many different styles of interviewing, ranging from the friendly, informal, conversational approach to the more formal, controlled style of questioning, and good interviewers eventually develop a variation of the method which, for them, brings the best results, and suits their personality. There are some essential qualities which the successful interviewer must possess: an interest and respect for people as individuals, and flexibility in response to them; an ability to show understanding and sympathy for their point of view; and, above all, a willingness to sit quietly and listen. People who cannot stop talking themselves, or resist the temptation to contradict or push an informant with their own ideas, will take away information which is either useless or positively misleading. But most people can learn to interview well.

The first point is the preparation, through reading and in other ways, of background information. The importance of this varies a good deal. The best way of starting off some pieces of work may be through exploratory interviews, mapping out a field and picking up ideas and information. With the help of these a problem may be defined, and some of the resources for solving it located. The 'general gathering interview' at the beginning of a local project, like the 'pilot interview' of a big survey, can be a very useful stage. And of course there is no point in having any interview at all unless the informant is, in some sense, better informed than oneself. The interviewer comes to learn, and indeed often gets people to talk in just this spirit. For example, Roy Hay has found in his research with the Clydeside shipbuilders that quite often,

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seem especially interested in testing your credentials to be an oral historian by probing your knowledge of the subject under discussion I have often felt, particularly at the beginning of an interview session, that they were interviewing me These sort of queries are ploys in status games'[2]

Such demanding informants are rare Nevertheless, even with a more general historical study of a community or an industry, it is important to pick up a knowledge of local practices and terminology as quickly as possible John Marshall, for example, points out how misleading the question 'At what age did you leave school?' could be in the Lancashire cotton towns A former millgirl would answer, at fourteen, and it was only because he knew that the majority had been half timers in the loom sheds long before leaving school—a fact which they took for granted—that he then went on to ask, 'When did you begin work?'[3] Many oral historians have found that a basic knowledge for work terms is useful, as a key to establishing mutual respect and trust And Beatrice Webb, decades earlier, made the same point with a characteristic sharpness

> To cross-examine a factory inspector without understanding the distinction between a factory and a workshop is an impertinence. Especially important is a familiarity with technical terms and a correct use of them *To start interviewing any specialist* without this equipment will not only be a waste of time, but may lead to more or less courteous dismissal, after a few general remarks and some trite opinions For technical terms are so many levers to lift into consciousness and expression the more abstruse and out-of the way facts or series of facts, and it is exactly these more hidden events that are needed to complete descriptive analysis and to verify hypotheses [4]

Nor is this true only of the specialist It is an equal 'impertinence to subject numbers of working people in a community or an industry to questions, without first ensuring, as far as possible, that they are historically relevant and correctly phrased for the local context

A broader study of social change, depending on a rela wide spectrum of informants, also demands p

careful preparation of the form of questions before interviewing. Asking questions in the best way is clearly important in any interview. This is, however, an issue which can raise strong feelings among oral historians. A contrast may be made between so-called box-ticking, 'questionnaires', whose rigidly structured logical patterns so inhibit the memory that the 'respondent'—again the choice of term itself suggestive—is reduced to monosyllabic or very short answers; and, at the other extreme, not so much an 'interview' at all, but as a free 'conversation', in which the 'person', 'tradition-bearer', 'witness', or 'narrator' is 'invited to talk' on a matter of mutual interest.[5] The truth is that it takes great deftness, and a well-chosen informant, to be able, like George Ewart Evans, to get outstanding material while remaining 'relaxed, unhurried', and giving the informant 'plenty of time to move about . . . Let the interview run. I never attempt to dominate it. The least one can do is to guide it and I try to ask as few questions as I can . . . Plenty of time and plenty of tape and few questions.'[6] Those few questions are based on long experience, combined with a clear idea obtained in advance of what each particular informant may tell. On the other hand, no oral historians to my knowledge have argued for the rigid inflexible questionnaire style of interview.

It is really the needs which follow from a particular type of research which make advance planning of questioning essential—for example, in any project where interviewing work is shared in a team, or where paid interviewers are used; or wherever material is to be used for systematic comparisons. The merits and drawbacks of the 'two schools of interviewing' are nicely summarized in a more qualified contrast by Roy Hay:

Firstly there is the 'objective/comparative' approach usually based on a questionnaire, or at least a very highly structured interview in which the interviewer keeps control and asks a series of common questions to all respondents. The aim here is to produce material which transcends the individual respondent and can be used for comparative purposes . . . In the hands of flexible, sensitive interviewers, who are prepared to abandon the script when necessary, this approach can generate very useful material indeed,

but it can be deadly. Promising lines of inquiry are too easily choked off and, worse still, people are forced into the predetermined framework of the interviewers and so large relevant areas of experience are never examined at all.

At the other extreme is the free flowing dialogue between interviewer and respondent, with no set pattern, in which conversation is followed wherever it leads. This method occasionally turns up the very unexpected and leads to completely new lines of inquiry but it can very easily degenerate into little more than anecdotal gossip. It can produce miles and miles of useless tape and impossible problems of selection and transcription.[7]

Beyond this, there is also the effect of the personalities involved in each particular interview. Some interviewers are naturally more chatty than others, and can draw out an informant this way (although this is relatively unusual, and a more common effect of chattiness can be to shut people up). And informants vary from the very talkative, who need few questions, just steering, or now and then a very specific question to clarify some point which is unclear, to the relatively laconic, who with encouragement, broad open ended questions, and supplementary prompts, can reveal much richer memories than at first seemed possible.

There are a few basic principles in the phrasing of questions which apply in any interview. Questions should always be as simple and as straightforward as possible, in familiar language. Never ask complex, double-barrelled questions—only half will usually be answered, and it usually won't be clear which half. Avoid a phrasing which points to an unclear answer: for example, ask, 'How often did you go to church?', rather than, 'Did you often go to church?' Of course occasional hesitation does not matter at all, and may even win a little sympathy from the informant. But frequent apologetic confusion is simply perplexing, and is especially to be avoided as a style of asking delicate personal questions since it only conveys your own embarrassment. A careful or indirect question, previously worked out and confidently put, is much better. It shows you know what you're doing, so the atmosphere is more likely to stay relaxed.

You will need a different kind of phrasing

specific facts and to get description or comment. The latter demands an 'open-ended' type of question, like, 'Tell me all about . . .', 'What did you think/feel about that?', or 'Can you describe that to me?' Other cue words for this sort of question are 'explain', 'expand on', 'discuss' or 'compare'. If it is a really important point, you can encourage at length: 'All right, so you're in —. Shut your eyes, and give me a running commentary—what you see, hear . . .' A physical description can also be suggested as a lead into an evaluation of a person's character. Right through the interview whenever you get a bald fact which you think might be usefully elaborated, you can throw in an inviting interjection—'That sounds interesting'; or more directly, 'How?', 'Why not?', 'Who was that?'—The informant may then take up the cue. If, after some comment, you want more, you can be more emphatic ('That's very interesting'), or mildly challenging ('But some people say that . . .'), or try a fuller supplementary question. In most interviews, it is very important to use both kinds of questions. For example, you may be told, as a general comment, that 'we helped each other out', 'we were all one big family in the street', but if you ask a specific question such as who outside the family helped when the mother was ill, it may become clear that neighbourly aid was less a practice than an ideal. Getting behind stereotyped or non-committal generalizations to detailed memories is one of the basic skills, and opportunities, of oral history work.

Leading questions must normally be avoided. If you indicate your own views, especially early in an interview, you are more likely to get an answer which the informant thinks you would like to hear, and will therefore be unreliable or misleading as evidence. There are some exceptions to this. If you know somebody has very strong views, especially from a minority standpoint, it may be essential to show a basic sympathy with them to get started at all. Also, in order to allow the possibility of some responses which would be conventionally disapproved by most people, it may be best to ask a loaded question: 'Can you tell me of a time when you had to severely punish . . .?', 'Were most people taking

home materials from the works in those days?' or 'I hear the mayor was a very difficult man for his immediate employees to get along with'—which is much more likely to provoke a clear reaction than a bland form like, 'I know the mayor was a very generous and wise person Did you find him so?'[8] But such questions are dangerous on most occasions, and are not normally appropriate Most questions should be carefully phrased to avoid suggesting an answer This can be quite an art in itself For example, 'Did you enjoy your work?' is loaded, 'Did you like your work or not?', or 'How did you feel about your work' are neutral

Finally, avoid asking questions which make informants think in your way rather than theirs For example, when dealing with concepts like social class, your information is much stronger evidence if you encourage them to produce their own basic terms, and then use these in the subsequent discussion And try to date events by fixing the time in relation to their own age, or a stage of life, such as marriage, or a particular job or house

Even if you are going to carry out only a small oral history project of your own, it is worth thinking about the sequence of topics for the interviews and the phrasing of questions The strategy of the *interview* is not the informant's responsibility, but yours It is much easier to guide if you have a basic shape already in your mind, and questions can lead naturally from one to the other This also makes it easier, even when you digress, to remember what you still need to know about. In addition, for most projects you will need some basic background facts from all informants (origins and occupations of mother and father, own birth, education, occupations, marriage, and so on), and you will also find a recurrent need for basic and supplementary questions on many topics If you have already worked these out in your head, and can toss them *in* when needed, you can more easily concentrate on what the informant is saying, instead of trying to think of how to get in yourself

For many purposes a list of headings jotted down for reminders on less frequent topics is enough But for teamwork, or for a comparative project on any scale, a more fully

elaborated interview schedule is desirable. An example, complete with directions for interviewers, is illustrated in an appendix of Model Questions. Provided such a schedule is used flexibly and imaginatively, it can be advantageous; for in principle, the clearer you are about what is worth asking and how best to ask it, the more you can draw from *any* kind of informant. With relatively reticent people, who say right at the start, 'It's all right as long as you use the questions', this is obvious enough: and such informants are quite common. You can then follow the lines of the schedule more or less methodically. With very talkative people the schedule should be differently used. If they have a clear idea of what they want to say, or the direction the interview should take, follow them. And wherever possible avoid interrupting a story. If you stop a story because you think it is irrelevant, you will cut off not just that one, but a whole series of subsequent offers of information which *will* be relevant. But sooner or later, they will exhaust their immediate fund of recollections, and they too will *want* you to ask questions. With this kind of informant several visits will be needed, and afterwards you can play back your recordings, checking against the schedule what has been covered and what is worth asking in later sessions. The printed form of the schedule in this case becomes particularly useful. But normally it is much better to know the questions, ask them directly at the right moment, and keep the schedule in the background. Essentially it is a map for the interviewer; it can be referred to occasionally, but it is best to have it in mind, so that the ground can be walked with confidence.

Certain other decisions need to be taken before the interview. First, what equipment should be taken? In a minority of contexts, the best answer is none. Even note-taking, let alone tape recording, may arouse suspicion in some people. Fear of tape recorders is quite common among professionals whose work ethic emphasizes confidentiality and secrecy, like civil servants, or bank managers.[9] For different reasons it can also be found among very old people, who feel hostile to new technology; among minorities who have experienced persecution; or in close-knit communities where gossip is

feared Some people may object to recording, but not to note taking Even if neither is possible, a skilled interviewer can learn to hold enough of the main information and key phrases to jot down soon afterwards, and make an interview worthwhile Indeed, before tape recording made such a method seem by comparison impressionistic, this was the commonest sociological practice

Most people, however, will accept a tape recorder with very little anxiety, and quickly lose any immediate awareness of it. The recorder can even help the interview While it is on, people may be a little more likely to keep to the point, and other members of the family to stay out of the way And quite frequently, when it is switched off, some highly significant additional facts may be given, which could have been held back if there had been no recorder at all, information which is meant to be known to the researcher as background, but in confidence (and must of course be treated in this spirit) When using a tape recorder it is important to avoid drawing attention to the machine, and diverting one's own attention, by fussing about it If it is a new one, make sure you have read the manual which goes with it, had somebody demonstrate its workings, and practised operating it and setting it up Check before you set out that it is functioning, and that you have not only all the parts and tapes you need, but batteries and adaptor plugs

You can also take with you various aids to memory An old newspaper cutting, or a local street directory can help George Ewart Evans often takes a work tool 'In the countryside I often take along an old serrated sickle With that there is no need of any abstract explanation of what you are going about. He sees the object, and if you choose well he won't need any prodding to open up We are both right into our subject from the beginning In the same way if I was going to see an old miner, I'd take a pair of yorks or a tommy-box'[10] Since the focus of his interviews is the work process, such a tool is an ideal starting point If it was to be childhood in the family, a piece of clothing might be better, or for a political life story, an early pamphlet These might also stimulate the production of old letters, diaries, cuttings, and

photographs, which is particularly worth encouraging, and could be the most valuable by-product of an interview.

Next, where should the interview be held? It must be a place where the informant can feel at ease. Normally the best place will be their own home. This is especially true of an interview focusing on childhood or the family. An interview in a work-place, or in a pub, will activate other areas of memory more strongly, and may also result in a shift to a less 'respectable' style of speaking. A trip round the district can also prove rewarding, and stimulate other recollections.

Nearly always, it is best to be alone with the informant. Complete privacy will encourage an atmosphere of full trust in which candour becomes much more possible. This is usually true even of an old married couple who are particularly close to each other. Of course it is not always easy to find a tactful way of seeing them apart. (It is easier if you interview both of them; and particularly if two of you arrive together at the couple's home, and then pair off in different rooms.)

The presence of another person at the interview not only inhibits candour, but subtly pressurizes towards a socially acceptable testimony. Fortunately, however, this is not all disadvantage. An old couple, or a brother and sister, will often provide corrections of information which are positively helpful. They can also stimulate each other's memory. This effect becomes still more marked when a larger group of old people get together. There will be a much stronger tendency than in private to produce generalizations about the old days, but as they argue and exchange stories among each other, some fascinating insights can emerge. Of course the stories, even more than usual, must be understood partly as art forms, conveying symbolic meanings—indeed many more of them are likely to be about *other* people. But sometimes a group, for example in a public bar, may be the only way into a hidden world of a common work experience of sabotage or theft, or the secret devices of poachers in the countryside.

The group can also be a useful device in other situations.

of the Manchester Unemployed Workers Movement of the 1930s, and in five hours of co-operative discussion reconstructed many of the gaps in the newspaper evidence which they had previously assembled With more self defended public figures, such as Canadian politicians, Peter Oliver has found cross examination by two or even three interviewers effective, and David Edge used a triangular interview for his work on radio-astronomers Beatrice Webb, although strongly favouring privacy for the normal interview, also developed a technique of 'wholesale interviewing' in the more relaxed atmosphere of social occasions, once with a party 'even telling fortunes from their hands, with all sorts of interesting results!' At the dinner table or in the smoking-room she found that 'you can sometimes start several experts arguing among themselves, and in this way you will pick up more information in one hour than you will acquire during a whole day in a series of interviews' [11]

Once the preliminary decisions have been made, you have to make contact with your chosen informant You can write (enclosing a stamped addressed envelope), or sometimes call in person or telephone It will always be much easier if you can say that somebody else in the informant's own social network has recommended them You need to explain very briefly the purpose of the research Suggest a possible time for a first visit, but always leave the informant the chance to propose another, or to refuse altogether With a minority of informants, like politicians or professionals, it may be wise to set out your research proposal and the use you intend for the interview more fully This will help them to decide whether to see you, and will clarify your future right to use of the material Some may begin thinking about the topics which interest you and search out some old papers before you come

Most people would be more likely to find too long a letter forbidding, so it is best to wait until your first meeting Then start by explaining the subject of your project or your book, and how the informant can help you Many people will protest that they have nothing useful to tell you, and need reassurance that their own experience is worthwhile, that it

is unfamiliar for younger people whose lives have been very different, and essential for the making of real social history. Some may be genuinely surprised at your interest, and you will need to be more than usually encouraging in the early stages of the interview. Some will explicitly raise the question of confidentiality, and not want their names given. Be open about your intentions, and honour any promises you make. Most people will trust you to be discreet with what they tell you—and this trust must be respected. Do not attach their names, without their explicit consent, to damaging quotations about themselves or their neighbours.

The start of this first meeting is also normally the best time to ask whether the interview may be tape-recorded, although sometimes this can be suggested in the initial approach. Some oral historians believe in using the first meeting as a brief, exploratory visit, for preparing and getting to know an informant, without using a tape recorder. The drawback is that, even in trying to establish basic facts about the informant's background, it is difficult not to tap the essence of the memory. You can go over the same ground on a second visit, but it is likely to be presented in a much more stilted way. In my own experience, it is best to get the recorder going as quickly as you can once you get talking.

This raises another matter controversial among oral historians—the quality of recording. For a really good recording, of the quality needed for a radio programme, you will probably need to eliminate acoustic problems in the room, carefully setting up the equipment and placing the microphone, which may be pinned on an informant's clothing or even placed like a halter round the neck. Until all this is completed, you need to a...d talking about the subject which you want to recc ... radio producers learn to do all this in a friendl... only w... they have never previously ... doubt ...ays a... tension to the ... do ... prestige of ... th ... buy thei ... ha ... with ... wc

of the machine that you do have, any more than there is a special virtue in driving badly or typing with two fingers And there are some elementary rules which will improve the quality of recordings from any tape recorder

First of all, try to use a quiet room where you will not be disturbed by others talking, and there are no loud background noises, or acoustic problems like those caused by hard surfaces Traffic outside can be dulled by drawing curtains, but a spitting fire will sound surprisingly loud on the tape, especially if the microphone is not close to the speaker's mouth In his experience with recording dialect in ordinary homes, Stanley Ellis has found that radio and television, a ticking clock, or a budgerigar, could

spoil a recording completely The acoustics of the room itself should be observed A tiny room, well stuffed with furniture and with washing airing on a clothes horse can be an excellent studio A large quarry tiled kitchen with plastered walls may give a tremendous reverberation sufficient to spoil the whole recording[12]

Next, consider where to put the recorder and the microphone Never place them close together, or you will record the machine's own noise The recorder is best placed on the floor, out of the informant's view but where you can watch it yourself, and glance from time to time to see if the tape is nearly exhausted without drawing attention to it The microphone should not be placed on a hard, vibratory surface, nor several feet away from the speaker Don't record across a hard topped table Ideally the microphone should be a foot away from the informant's mouth With a firm hand, if you choose to sit side by side, you can hold it, or you can place it on a stand, or put it on a cushion or scarf on a side table All this can be done very quickly You can stress that it's the informant's voice you need, not the clock or the bird or the radio And make sure at the same time that the informant is sitting comfortably, and has not given up a favourite chair Then switch on the recorder and let it run, while chatting Play this back to test that the recording level is correctly adjusted If the level is too low, the background noise will

swamp the recording; if too high, the sound will become distorted. Then set the recorder running again and, apart from changing tapes, leave it running while the recording session continues. It is a bad practice to keep switching off when the informant wanders off the point, or during your own questions. And never begin with a formal announcement into the microphone, 'This is—interviewing—at—'; it is a formalizing, freezing device. You could leave some spare tape at the beginning to add this afterwards if you wish—but not before, or it may boom out in your playback test.

You are now ready to launch your opening question. What follows will vary greatly depending on the kind of informant, the style of interview you favour, and what you want to know. But again, there are some basic rules. An interview is a social relationship between people with its own conventions, and a violation of these may destroy it. Essentially, the interviewer is expected to show interest in the informant, allowing him or her to speak fully without constant interruption, and at the same time to provide some guidance of what to discuss if needed. Lying behind it is a notion of mutual co-operation, trust, and respect.

An interview is *not* a dialogue, or a conversation. The whole point is to get the informant to speak. You should keep yourself in the background as much as possible, simply making supportive gestures, but not thrusting in your own comments and stories. It is not an occasion which calls for demonstrations of your own knowledge or charm. And do not allow yourself to feel embarrassed by pauses. Maintaining silence can be a valuable way of allowing an informant to think further, and drawing out a further comment. The time for conversation is later on, when the recorder is switched off. Of course you can go too far in this direction, and allow an informant to falter for lack of come-back. To grind to a halt in silence at the end of an exhausted topic is discouraging, and a firm question is needed before this point. But in general, you should ask no more questions than are needed, in a clear, simple, unhurried, manner. Keep the informant relaxed and confident. Above all, never interrupt a story. Return to the original point at the end of the digression if

you wish, with a phrase like 'Earlier you were saying ', 'Going back to ', or 'Before we move on ' But it is axiomatic, if the informant wants to go on to a new line, to be prepared to follow

Keep showing that you are interested, throughout the interview Rather than continually saying 'yes —which will sound silly on the recording—it is quite easy to learn to mime the word, nod, smile, lift your eyebrows, look at the inform ant encouragingly You must be precisely clear where the interview has gone, and especially avoid asking for information that has already been given This demands a quick memory and quite intense concentration You may find you need to take rough notes as you go along although it is best to do without this aid if you can At the same time you should be watching for the consistency of the answers, and for conflicts with other sources of evidence If you are doubtful about something, try returning to it from another angle, or suggesting, tactfully and gently, that there may be a different view of the matter—'I have heard' or 'I have read that ' But it is particularly important not to contradict or argue with an informant As Beatrice Webb observes pungently

It is disastrous to 'show off' or to argue the client must be permitted to pour out his fictitious tales, to develop his preposterous theories, to use the silliest arguments, without demur or expression of dissent or ridicule.[13]

Certainly, the more you can show understanding and sym pathy for somebody's standpoint, the more you are likely to learn about it

Discussion of the past can recall painful memories which still evoke strong feelings, and very occasionally these may distress an informant If this happens be gently supportive, as you would be to a friend With some informants it may be wiser to leave the more delicate questions to a later stage in an interview If it is absolutely essential to get an answer, wait until the end, and perhaps switch off the recorder But never press too hard when an informant seems defensive or reluctant to answer It is generally best to try to steer to

more open conclusion, asking for a summing up of feeling about an experience, or whether anything needs to be added. An interview which ends on a relaxed note is more likely to be remembered as pleasant, and lead on to another.

You need always to try to be sensitively aware of how informants are feeling. If they seem fidgety and are only giving rather terse answers, they may be feeling tired or unwell, or watching the clock for some other engagement: in which case, close the recording session as quickly as possible. While avoiding glancing at your own watch, always fit in with their times, and turn up punctually when you are expected, or they may become tense waiting for you. In normal circumstances, an hour-and-a-half to two hours will in any case be a sensible maximum. An old person, in the interest of the occasion, may not realize the danger of becoming overtired, but will certainly regret it afterwards, and may not want to repeat the experience.

Do not rush away after the recording session. You need to stay, to give a little of yourself, and show warmth and appreciation in return for what has been given to you. Accept a cup of tea if it is offered, and be prepared to chat about the family and photographs. This may be the moment when documents are most likely to be lent to you. It is also a good time for fixing another visit. At this stage you can talk a little about yourself in return, too—although still with caution. Do not get into an argument on subjects likely to be controversial such as teenage behaviour or politics, which is more likely to make for reticence later on.

In some interview situations grander hospitality may be given—an ample lunch with drink—which can perhaps emphasize the normal problem of mutual obligation, bringing a pressure to produce an 'official' version of history. But in most cases you can show sensitivity in making use of the material which has been given, even if it contributes to a conclusion of your own which your informant would not share. Beatrice Webb had no doubts here:

> Accept what is offered . . . Indeed, the less formal the conditions of the interview the better. The atmosphere of the dinner-table or the smoking-room is a better 'conductor' than that of the office

during business hours ... A personally conducted visit to this or that works of institution may be a dismal prospect; it may even seem a waste of effort to inspect machinery or plant which cannot be understood, or which has been seen *ad nauseam* before ... But it is a mistake to decline. In the course of these tiring walks and weary waitings, experiences may be recalled or elicited which would not have cropped up in the formal interview in the office.[14]

Her comment is based on research work of her own in which the normal interview situation was uncommon in two ways: both interviewer and informant were drawn from the top levels of society, and they were roughly the same age. Usually interviewers, whether professional historians or the married women typically employed for survey work, are middle-class, and in their thirties or forties. Their informants are normally ordinary working-class or middle-class people, and in oral history work often considerably older. Thus to their normal modesty, or even undervaluation of self, may be added the fragility of old age, and a special vulnerability to discomfort or anxiety. Changing this social balance can have implications for interviewing method which need considering. For example, an interview between the sexes will often help to encourage sympathy and response; but there are some kinds of confidence, for example about sexual behaviour, which are probably much more easily exchanged between married people of the same sex. A very young person, or somebody with a very superior manner, may have more difficulty in gaining trust. Race can provide another kind of barrier. On the other hand, a person from the same working-class background and community as an informant will win an initial rapport, although later on may find difficulty in asking questions because of a common social network, or because the answer (often mistakenly) seems obvious. Similarly, considerable problems of reticence may be encountered if you interview a member of your own family. Differences in social background have to be recognized, and where possible met by variations in interviewing style.

The most recurrent problem is presented by the public

personality as informant. Such people are generally tougher and fitter, and perhaps even younger, than the typical informant. They may have such a strong idea of their own story, and what matters in it, that all they can offer is stereotyped recollections. They often also, 'in the course of long careers in public life will have developed a protective shell by which they ward off troublesome questions and while seeming to say something worthwhile in fact give away as little as possible'. This can have become such a habit that 'the subject, even if trying to be frank and open, almost without thinking may reply with the clichéd responses which served so well on other occasions. It is this defensive veil that the interviewer must penetrate'.[15]

Occasionally innocence itself can penetrate the shell. 'Politicians have the right experience to be able to deal very cleverly with a young innocent historian', observes Asa Briggs. But 'a very young man can . . . get a lot from a very old man that members of his own generation don't get'. More usually, there is no alternative but to try to be 'sensitive *and* tough at the same time'.[16] Some of the basic rules still apply: the danger of breaking up the interview through too challenging cross-questioning, and also the positive advantages of, for example, an informal discussion over the dinner-table. Nevertheless, several oral historians, such as James Wilkie in Mexico, Lawrence Goodwin in the southern United States, and Peter Oliver in Canada, have argued for the need to 'cross-examine' in a much more vigorous manner. The oral historian, according to Peter Oliver, while avoiding an openly 'adversary' posture,

> should not hesitate to challenge the answers he receives and to probe . . . 'Come on now, Senator, surely there was more to it . . .? Mr So-and-So claims that . . .' Most politicians are pretty worldly and hard-skinned types; few will resent being pushed to re-examine their initial responses if it is done with some tact and skill, and often it is only by doing so that the interviewer will uncover truly significant material.[17]

A comparable instance is provided by the leading radio-astronomers interviewed by David Edge. They combined a

very idealized image of science and what was important to its history with the defensiveness needed for success in the competitive grant aided politics of the scientific world He developed a triangular method, in which the radio astronomer was interviewed at the same time by Edge, who as a former scientist and perhaps personal friend, and already in possession of inside secrets, was equipped to challenge on technical issues, and by Mike Mulkay, a scientifically naïve sociologist, waiting to pounce on wider inconsistencies and points of interest David Edge normally led the interview, chasing detailed points, challenging, and arguing, Mike Mulkay came in as an 'outsider', and there was often a notable change in the informant's voice when a question came from him This argumentative technique clearly depends partly on some sort of common membership of a social group, and partly on knowing exactly how far the challenge may be pressed

In the extreme reverse situation, the interviewer's chief problems are on quite another, indeed much more basic, level A European historian collecting oral tradition in Africa is operating in a completely strange culture, and is generally concerned with learning something of its language and basic rules Among the Kuba, for example, Jan Vansina found that unless all the right people were present, and the right location was chosen, only parts of the traditions of the tribe would be told 'Among the Akan, sacrifices to the ancestors have to be made before certain traditions are recited, so that the field worker must be supplied with a sheep or a cask of rum for this purpose' The Bushongo need to be supplied with home brewed palm wine, and to recite their tradition at night, in the presence of their ancestral relics The English historian at home knows not to try to interview a publican on a Bank Holiday or a priest on Good Friday, and can concentrate on less elementary social nuances Nor does he or she commonly have to rely on interpreters, or to pay for testimonies to be made Most of the basic rules, such as the avoidance of leading questions, and the need to ensure that the informant is relaxed, apply to the collector in Africa as anywhere, and with ingenuity,

even some of the special problems can be played against each other:

> One should try to see that the informant is . . . prevented from feeling tempted to give false testimony *in order to gain favour from* the field-workers . . . The informant must not know whether the field-worker is or is not interested in his testimony, for if he does, he will distort it. Hence good informants must not be rewarded more highly than bad ones . . . In addition, during the recording of the testimony, one must adopt a sympathetic attitude towards the informant, without, however, revealing one's real feelings. In Rwanda and Burundi, where I recorded testimonies on magnetic tape, I pretended that I did not understand a word of the language. The clerk who was with me would explain to the informant what he had to do, and then the informant could recite the testimony as he wished. Since he was under the impression that I did not understand what he was saying, he felt that how he said it was unimportant, and he had no particular motive for distorting the tradition.[18]

In one sense this cash-eased exercise in cultural non-communication is as much a parody of how to interview as the worst instances of baiting and insinuating on television back in the ex-imperial capital. One hopes that Africans will before long be creating their own oral history. But these extreme cases do serve to illustrate the need for flexibility in method; and the possibility, too, of securing valuable material in extremely adverse circumstances.

We must return, however, to the ordinary oral historian who was left chatting over a cup of tea. After leaving, three things remain to be done. First, record as quickly as possible any comments of your own on the context of the interview, the character of the informant, additional remarks made off the tape, and what may *not* have been said. Next, label the tape or box. Later on, play back the tape to check what information has been obtained and what you still need. In particular, make sure that you have the basic facts about the informant which any social historian would want to know in order to use it as evidence: the informant's age, sex, homes, and occupations, and also his or her parents' occupations. At the same time you can make a list of any names whose spelling needs to be checked with the informant. Finally, if

this was your last visit, you can verify these points (providing a stamped addressed envelope again) along with your thank-you letter This letter can usefully restate the general purpose of the interview, and if appropriate go into questions of confidentiality or copyright But it is in any case a courtesy which will be valued And it is on such personal care, just as much as historical expertise, that success in interviewing depends

7

Storing and Sifting

THE recording has been completed: but how then should the tapes be kept? And how can they be used to make history? We need first to consider the problems of storage and indexing, and then the stages in writing and presenting history with oral evidence.

Because magnetic tape recording is a relatively recent technique, it is far from certain how long it can last and what are the ideal conditions for its storage. The quality of tape has, moreover, been gradually improved, and with this the principal storage considerations have changed. Good modern tapes no longer have a backing which is likely to disintegrate. The chief problem now is the avoidance of 'print through', or sound echoes, which can develop during storage. Some experts recommend various means of reducing the risk of print through, such as running the tape through a recorder once a year so that it is re-spooled, but it is not clear that this is a worthwhile safety measure—indeed it may on balance create worse risks of other damage. For the moment, there are only two certain rules.

First, the quality of tape to be used for storage should be carefully chosen. It might be advisable to store on a different tape from that used for the recording itself. It is important that the original recording should use a tape with a high frequency range and low distortion, and also a low background noise, so that it reproduces sound as faithfully as possible. In addition, it must be recorded at a sufficient speed: for speech, on a reel-to-reel machine, no slower than $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches per second (i.p.s.), or there will be an audible loss of quality and some words will become difficult to catch on replaying.

Obviously storage cannot make up for a bad choice of tape or other mistakes in the original recording But in addition to the qualities essential in the field-work tape, the storage tape must have a low print through, and at present this means a thicker tape should be chosen Thicker tapes are also less likely to suffer damage when in use on the machine

Secondly, the place for storing the tape needs to be considered The tape can be damaged by dust, or by excessive damp or heat It should never be exposed to temperatures much higher than normal room temperatures by, for example, being stored up against a heating pipe Modern tapes do not require artificially controlled temperatures or humidity, but the optimum for storage is now considered to be a temperature of 20°C and a relative humidity of 50 to 60 per cent Tapes can also be damaged, and even completely wiped of their recordings, by interference from a powerful magnetic dynamo This risk needs to be taken into account in some buildings, as well as when travelling with them But in practice, for most oral historians it will suffice to store tapes in a cupboard, stood on the shelf in their boxes on edge, away from the sun or fire or heating pipes, in a room comfortable for working in And don't drop cigarette ash on them

Every tape, as soon as used, needs to be well labelled It is best to label the box, the spool, and with reel to-reel the tape itself The tape can be quite easily labelled on its red and green leads Without these precautions you may lose tapes by accidentally winding them on to a wrong spool, or replacing them in a wrong box, and then perhaps even making another recording on top of the original It is 'of course' much better if the original tape is kept as a master, and a copy made from it for normal use, and also if a machine is adapted so that it is possible to listen but not to record on it For a public archive both precautions are essential

Exactly what you put on the label will depend on how you develop your system of indexing If you have only a few tapes, it is enough to put the informant's name, 'Tape One, Side One', 'Tape One, Side Two', and so on Corresponding to this, a box of cards can be kept in alphabetical order, each card with the name of an informant, and a list of the

tapes made with them. It is a great time-saver, if you also have transcripts, to note on the cards which pages of transcript cover each side of tape. This box of cards then constitutes an index and catalogue of your collection, and you can easily check whether a tape or transcript ought to be there. The tapes and transcripts can themselves also be kept in alphabetical order to help finding. The disadvantage of this is that each new interview has to be inserted within the existing sequence, rather than added to it. After a while it becomes much easier to store the interviews in order of accession, giving each new informant a number, and adding the number to the index card. If you decide to put only the number on either the tapes or the transcripts, you will also need another index giving the name for each interview number. Similarly, if you decide it is more useful to keep your main index in number order because, for example, this conveniently separates two different parts of your collection, you will still find that you need an alphabetical index which at least gives the number of each informant's interview.

For a small project, one or two boxes of cards along these lines may be all that is necessary. A note of the place and date of recording, made at the time of the interview, can be left as it is with the tape; and the general subject matter sufficiently remembered to know whether it is worth looking up. But as the collection grows, and especially as more people contribute to making and using it, more information needs to be available in some systematic form.

First, either on the original cards or in a parallel sequence, it is desirable to add to the informant's name, when and where the recording was made, and by whom. It is also useful to note any important variations in the method or quality of recording. If we take a collection of reel-to-reel tapes normally recorded at $3\frac{3}{4}$, the entry for a somewhat botched recording might look like this:

MRS Sarah JENNINGS Interview number 36

ADDRESS ..3 Gas Terrace, Woodstock,..
..............Oxfordshire..............

Recorded at above/~~elsewhere~~ ....

....

Interviewer ... Henry Mayhew ....

Dates of interviews ... 31 March 1976 (tape 1) ..
... and 12 April 1976 (tape 2) ....

Tapes	Sides	Transcript pages	Notes
1	1	1–16	
	2	16–29	recorded at 7/8 (rear of tape)
2	1	29–45	
	2	45–62	Spoilt by loud hum

Restrictions of access ... None ....

Secondly, it is worth extracting some of the basic background details about the informant which are essential for evaluating the interview and should thus be found within it. They will of course vary to some extent, depending on the focus of the project. Thus a political collection might include specific entries for elections fought or offices held; and the Imperial War Museum lists details such as 'service', 'arm of service', 'rank', 'decorations and awards', which would be inappropriate in a different context. But most historians need at least to know when an informant was born, his or her parents' occupations, where they lived, whether or not there were brothers and sisters, the informant's own education, occupational career, religious and political affiliation if any, whether he or she married, and if so, when, to whom, and whether they had children. All this can again be conveniently summarized on a card:

Mrs Sarah JENNINGS 36

born ... 1893 ....

at ... 7 Market Place, Woodstock ...

father's occupation ... bootmaker ....

mother's occupation .. domestic servant before ..

brothers 3 (one died as infant) ..... marriage ...

sisters ... 2 ...

education .. board school till 13 ...

occupations ... (dates) ...

.. assistant in clothes shop ... 1906–9 ...

.. apprentice dressmaker 1909–12 ...

.. dressmaker in clothing factory 1912–15 ..

.. part-time outwork from factory at home ...

politics .. inactive 1915–30 ...

religion .. occasional Church of England ...

lived at ... (dates) ...

.... 7 Marketplace ... 1893–1901 ...

..... 17 Oxford Street ... 1901–15 ...

.... 3 Gas Terrace ... since 1915 ...

...

date of marriage ..... 1915 ...

husband/~~wife~~'s occupations ...

... garage mechanic to c 1950 ...

..... caretaker ... c 1950–60 ...

children .. 1 girl ... 2 boys ...

...

All this information can be condensed, and some of it codified, if this form seems too long. At the end of *Speak for England*, Melvyn Bragg has added a very helpful index of 'The People' set out in this form:

160 JOSEPH WILLIAM PARKIN LIGHTFOOT *b.* Bolton Low Houses 13th December 1908 *br.* Two *s.* Two *pl.* Fletchertown 1938, Kirkland 1942, Wigton 1954 *f.j.* Coal-miner *o.j.* Retired, previously coal-miner 1922, farm labourer 1924, labourer on pipe-tracks, part-time gardener 1930s, driver Cumberland Motor Services 1942–68, own shop in 1950s *e.* Bolton Low Houses until 14 *r.* Methodist *p.* Labour *m.* Married *ch.* Two

The abbreviations are self-explanatory, except perhaps for *pl.*, which means 'places lived in'.

A third possibility is to create a series of content cards. For some projects, which are organized to follow a definite interview schedule, this may be superfluous; all the necessary clues will be in the basic background of the informant. But the larger and more diverse a collection, the more a contents card catalogue becomes necessary. One of the most fully developed examples is provided by the B.B.C. Sound Archives:

CAMPBELL, Beatrice, *Lady Glenavy (Wife of 2nd Baron Glenavy)* AA
LP28643 D. H. Lawrence And His Circle the first of 29.1.64
Front two programmes in which she recalls some impressions of her friendship with
19' 12" Katherine Mansfield, John Middleton Murry, D. H. Lawrence, and Frieda Lawrence.
Producer Joseph Hone
Copyright PF CTIR 38700A
Annots. None
Trans TP 30.3.64.
Script.
Note This talk was recorded in Ireland, and is taken from her autobiography Today We Will Only Gossip, published by Constable, 9.4.64.
/continued .

CAMPBELL, Beatrice, *Lady Glenavy (Wife of 2nd Baron Glenavy)* AA
LP28643 29.1.64
Recalls first meeting Katherine Mansfield and Middleton Murry, who were great friends of her future husband, Gordon Campbell Katherine's appearance and manner, felt Katherine regarded her as an interloper into their circle, and tried to shock her with daring conversation; Katherine's early struggles as a writer, sufferings from unhappy marriage and love affairs, devotion and care of her

First meeting with Katherine arising out of quarrel between Lawrence and Frieda, and their subsequent friendship; Katherine's association with Murry.
– 2 – /continued ...

CAMPBELL, Beatrice, *Lady Glenavy* (*Wife of 2nd Baron Glenavy*) AA
LP28643 29.1.64.
Gr.145: Katherine's complex character and varying moods: two occasions when she 'put on acts'; a week-end the Campbells spent at the Murry's country cottage which was 'not a success'.
Gr.220: Reminisces about time Katherine and Murry spent on visit to Campbell's cottage in Ireland; Murry sorry to leave, but Katherine glad to return to London.

-3-

These cards provide a particularly full summary of the contents of each item in the archive, but they begin with a briefer heading. A contents index, depending on the time which is to be spent on it, can aim to be brief or full. But it ought at least to indicate the principal places, social groups, occupations or industries, political or other ideologies, personal or family matters, and (more clearly than these cards) time periods covered.

Finally, especially with a large public collection, it may be necessary to create a general system of indexing leading to the other card series. Some public archives have had sufficient resources and ambition to experiment with computerized indexes. Most oral history collections will have to be content with a process closer to the name and subject indexing of an ordinary book. Thus all the places, persons, and organizations on the cards might be included. Important events could be similarly listed. And with more difficulty, a cross-referenced series of subject headings could be developed. There are at present no clearly established models to follow, so that it is important to use a system which allows for modification in the light of experience. And above all, it should be designed to help, rather than replace, human imagination, understanding, and intuition. In practice this means that the best cataloguing and indexing systems will tell the historian which parts of the collection will repay further investigation, and which will not. Ideally it should be made possible to eliminate, as quickly as possible, all those main sections, or individual items, which are concerned with a different time, place, or general subject-matter from the

historian's own interest. Thus before preceding to a contents catalogue as full as that of the B B C Sound Archives, it would be more valuable to break down the general index to this catalogue, so that 'Occupations'—'tin mining' was further sub-divided to lead to 'Cornwall'—'1900–14', or 'Folk Customs'—'harvest ceremonies' to 'East Anglia'—'1880s'.

Before a recording enters a public archive, another point needs to be clarified, as entries on two of our specimen cards suggest: that of control of the right to access and use. This is not, however, a simple issue, partly because the law of copyright is itself uncertain, but equally because it raises wider ethical questions of responsibility towards informants. The legal position is that there are two copyrights in a recording. The copyright in the recording as a recording is normally the property of the interviewer or of the institution or person who commissioned the interview. The copyright in the information in the recording—the informant's actual words—is the property of the interviewee. But normally some right to use this information is implied by a consent to be interviewed. Thus a person who, knowing that a historian is collecting material for a research study, agreed to be interviewed, would appear to have little ground for complaint if he found himself quoted in print. And in practice he would be very unlikely to attempt to prevent, or to seek compensation for, the publication of any quotation unless he considered it substantially damaging. A bona fide scholar is in fact unlikely to have committed an actionable libel, but it would be foolish anyway to provoke a publicized complaint. It is always important to consider carefully whether the publication of identifiable confidences could not cause local gossip or scandal. Equally, an informant could reasonably complain if information was used in a significantly different context from that suggested, and also, if it proved the making of a best seller, could claim a share of the earnings. For most projects, there is much to be said for this balance of rights and the chief lesson to be learnt is that in explaining a project to an interviewee not only its immediate object, but also the potential value of their information to wider historical

research, should be made clear. If the first approach is made in person rather than by post, this can at least be confirmed in a subsequent letter of thanks. An informal understanding of this kind has proved a satisfactory basis for the writing of innumerable sociological studies, as well as most of the oral history publications which we have discussed earlier. Similarly, the fact that in theory some copyright must also exist in most unpublished manuscript material, has rarely produced serious obstacles to the free access of scholars to the holdings of local and national record offices. It may well be that the best policy is normally to leave the issue unresolved. An insistence on a formal transfer of legal rights through explicit, written consent may not only worry an informant, but will actually reduce quite proper protection against exploitation.

There are, nevertheless, contexts in which a formal agreement has become the standard practice. This is the case in broadcasting, where observation of copyright has to be particularly careful because of the frequent involvement of public figures, and also due to the influence of the financial complexities of musical copyright. It is also advised by the Oral History Association of the United States, where standards were originally set for the recording of eminent public figures and a precise agreement was therefore necessary, not only as to copyright, but also as to whether particular pages of the transcript should be closed until a certain date, or accessible only by specific permission. In Britain the Imperial War Museum obtains a precise written agreement from its informants, who are often not merely eminent public figures, but especially security-conscious. The formula advocated in Willa Baum's booklet for American local historians is relatively simple:

I hereby give and grant to the CENTRAL CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY as a donation for such scholarly and educational purposes as the Society shall determine the tape recordings and their contents listed below: (signed) ..... (informant).

To this a rider may be added restricting part of the material: (signed) ..... (interviewer).

The parties hereto agree that pages 14–16 of the manuscript and the portions of the tape from which these pages were transcribed shall not be published or otherwise made available to anyone other than the parties hereto until January 1, 1984.

However, 'except in the few cases where sensitive material is really pertinent, it should be discouraged'.[1]

The Imperial War Museum, which has found that 'it is frequently more difficult to obtain assignments and settle other conditions of deposit and access with executors or heirs than with the informants themselves', seeks a quick exchange of letters 'to tie up all the legal loose ends' along the following lines:

I am now writing to formalize the conditions under which the Museum holds your recordings. The questions which I have already put to you verbally are listed below. I should be grateful if you would let me have your written answers in due course.

1. May the Museum's users be granted access to the recordings and any typescripts of them?
2. May the recordings and typescripts be used in the Museum's internal and external educational programmes?
3. May the Museum provide copies of the recordings and typescripts for its users?
4. Would you be prepared to assign your copyright in the information in the recordings to the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum? This would enable us to deal with such matters as publication and broadcasting, should they arise, without having to make prior reference to you. If you agree to this assignment it does not, of course, preclude any use which you might want to make of the information in the recordings yourself.

Whether or not such a formal agreement is reached, there remains an ethical responsibility towards the informant which is probably more important. First of all, if the recording has been made with an implicit assumption of confidentiality, that must be respected. Any quotation from it which might embarrass the informant must either be made anonymously, or with subsequent permission. Similarly, permission should always be sought for its use in a different manner from that originally understood: for example, instead of a

history book, a biographical collection, or an article in the local press, or a radio broadcast. Moreover, when informants have a right to a royalty fee, as for a broadcast, or a biographical collection, this should be secured for them. They should be warned of the broadcast time well enough in advance to tell friends. And if they are quoted at length in a book, they should receive their own free copy. As far as possible—and admittedly there are some legitimate forms of scholarly publication for which this might be counter-productive—informants' attention should be drawn to the use made of their material. Indeed, an oral historian who does not wish to share with informants the pleasure and pride in a published work ought to consider very seriously why this is so, and whether it is socially justifiable. There may perhaps be a case for publishing the material collected in a more popular form such as a local pamphlet as well as in some academic mode. One accepts that only the outstanding oral historian can reach the range of readership of a Studs Terkel with a single book. But it remains an over-riding ethical responsibility of the historian who uses oral evidence to ensure that history is given back to the people whose words helped to shape it.

It should be added that the depositing and preservation of tapes needs to be seen in the same light. They can be of interest and use to far more people than the historian who made the recording. All too many oral history tapes remain with the secretary of a local society, or in an academic's private study, effectively inaccessible to a wider public. This may be reasonable while they are being actively used for personal research, but commonly continues beyond this, partly because too few national or county record offices have organized facilities for storing and listening to tapes. But the offer of the original tapes, or copies, to a local record office or a public or university library, besides being desirable in itself, may stimulate the provision for those needs, and prove the seed for a significant collection—an asset which will find many different uses within the community.

For the same reason there is a strong argument, whatever the immediate use envisaged for them, for the full transcrip-

tion of tapes as the first stage in the writing and presentation of history Transcribing is undoubtedly very time-consuming, as well as being a highly skilled task It takes at least six hours, and for a recording with difficult speech or dialect up to twice as long, for each hour of recorded tape Yet unless the tape is fully transcribed, anybody but the person who made the recording—and so has quite a clear idea of what it contains—will be severely hampered in using it A contents card is at best only a rough guide for the visiting researcher listening to more than a few tapes takes several hours, where skimming through transcripts might take minutes But the person who makes the tape is also best able to ensure that transcription is accurate Because this task is so lengthy, and, apart from other claims on time, recording always seems more urgent, transcribing nearly always falls behind In a research project supported by a grant, this can be avoided only by making a full estimate of the transcribing time and equipment needed at the start, and recognizing that the work can only be carried out by a person with particular skills, working on a regular basis Part time agency audio-typing will either be incomprehensible or prohibitive A transcriber needs to be interested in the tapes, intelligent in making sense of them, especially in the key art of turning verbal pauses into written punctuation, and a good speller with an unusually quick ear It is also isolated work. These are not necessarily the qualities which make a successful secretary The only way to know whether somebody can transcribe well is to give them a tape and let them try

Most oral history projects will not have the resources to pay for a transcriber, and will need to carry out the work themselves If there is any money to spare, it is best spent on a tape recorder with a reverse foot-pedal for play-back, which will save them much time For a very small group, or for a researcher's own tapes, the process can, however, be quite markedly shortened, even if at the expense of long term satisfaction The best 'shortened transcript' lies between the full contents card and the complete transcription For the most part, the content is summarized in detail, but actual quotations are only used when the words are so w

vividly put that they are worth considering for extracts or quotations in the finished presentation. A finding device can be added in the margin, either by using the numbers in the counter-setting on the machine (although these unfortunately vary even between machines of the same make), or by listening through the tape after transcription and noting the time intervals every five or ten seconds (standard, but less quick to use).

Ultimately, however, there can be no substitute for a full transcript. Even the best shortened version is like an intelligent historian's notes from an archive rather than the original documents. Nor can the historian today know what questions will be asked by historians in the future, so that any selection will result in the loss of details which might later prove significant. The full transcript should therefore include everything, with the possible exception of diversions for checking that the recorder is on, having a cup of tea, or present-day chatting about the weather, illness, and so on. All questions should go in. Fumbling for a word may be left out, but other hesitations, and stop-gaps like 'you know' or 'see', should be included at this stage. The grammar and word order must be left as spoken. If a word or phrase cannot be caught, there should be a space in the transcript to indicate this. These are all quite straightforward guidelines. But the real art of the transcriber is in using punctuation and occasional phonetic spelling to convey the character of speech.

The transcript is in this sense a literary form and the problems which it raises are inseparable from those of subsequent quotation. The spoken word can very easily be mutilated in being taken down on paper and then transferred to the printed page. Some distortion is inevitable in cutting out pauses and distracting hesitations or false starts in the interests of readability. Much more serious is the distortion when the spoken word is drilled into the orders of written prose, through imposing standard grammatical forms and a logical sequence of punctuation. The rhythms and tones of speech are quite distinct from those of prose. Equally important, lively speech will meander, dive into irrelevancies, and

return to the point after unfinished sentences. Effective prose is by contrast systematic, relevant, spare. It is therefore very tempting for the writer, wishing to make a point effectively, to strip a spoken quotation, re-order it, and then, in order to make it continuous, slip in some connecting words which were never in the original. The point can be reached when the character of the original speech becomes unrecognizable. This is an extreme, but any writer, unless continually aware of this danger, may at times reach such a level of decadence in transcription.

The difficulties may be illustrated by taking as an example one of the first passages in Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*, an old farm worker's account of a domestic economy in the years before 1914. The picture he gives is very bare, highly effective —but so terse in detail that one wonders how far the original interview has been tidied up:

There were seven children at home and father's wages had been reduced to 10s. a week. Our cottage was nearly empty—except for people. There was a scrubbed brick floor and just one rug made of scraps of old clothes pegged into a sack. The cottage had a living-room, a larder, and two bedrooms. Six of us boys and girls slept in one bedroom and our parents and the baby slept in the other. There was no newspaper and nothing to read except the Bible. All the village houses were like this. Our food was apples, potatoes, swedes and bread, and we drank our tea without milk or sugar. Skim milk could be bought from the farm but it was thought a luxury. Nobody could get enough to eat no matter how they tried. Two of my brothers were out to work. One was eight years old and he got 3s. a week, the other got about 7s.[2]

There is in these lines an unremitting logical drive. Every word stands with evident purpose in its proper place. Every phrase is correctly punctuated. There are no ragged ends, no diversions to convey the speaker's own sense of a childhood home, or the bitterness or humour felt in poverty. Some phrases read like the author's own comments: 'skimmed milk . . . was thought a luxury'. There are no dialect words, no grammatical irregularities, no sparks of personal idiosyncrasy. The passage may convince but, unlike many others in the same book, it does not come alive. One wishes

but is provided with no indication of, where the interview has been cut, and what has been put in to sew it up again.

We can turn for a contrast to George Ewart Evans's *Where Beards Wag All*, also about Suffolk villagers, some of them from the same community. This is a book with more direct argument than *Akenfield*, but supported by substantial quotations in which we seem to hear the people themselves talking, even thinking aloud, in their own, very different style, as this old man:

It's like this: those young 'uns years ago, *I said*, well—it's like digging a hole, *I said*, and putting in clay and then putting in a tater on top o' thet. Well, you won't expect much will you? But now with the young 'uns today, it's like digging a hole and putting some manure in afore you plant: you're bound to get some growth ain't you? It will grow won't it? The plant will grow right well. What I say is the young 'uns today have breakfast afore they set off—a lot of 'em didn't used to have that years ago, and they hev a hot dinner at school and when they come home most of 'em have a fair tea, don't they? *I said*. These young 'uns kinda got the frame. Well, that's it! If you live tidily that'll make the marrow and the marrow makes the boon (bone) and the boon makes the frame.[3]

We have to pause here to listen, accept the difficult rhythm and syntax of his speech, ruminating, working round to the parable image which he has held all the time in store. This quotation certainly requires more adaptation by the reader. But that may be needed, and if so will become generally learnt, as the qualities of speech become more understood.

George Ewart Evans is using artistry in his quotation as much as Ronald Blythe. Probably some hesitations, pauses, or repetitions have been eliminated from the recorded speech, and he has put in punctuation. But he has done this in a way which preserves the texture of the speech. Italics are used to indicate unexpected emphasis, and punctuation to bring the phrases together rather than to separate them. The syntax is accepted; the breaks in the passage left. And occasionally a word is spelt phonetically to suggest the sound of the dialect. Too much phonetic spelling quickly reduces a quotation (from whatever social class) to absurdity, but the

odd word to convey a personal idiosyncrasy, or a key tone in a local accent like the Suffolk 'hev' and 'thet' used here, help to make a passage readable as speech without losing any of the force of its meaning

In transferring speech into print the historian thus needs to develop a new kind of literary skill, which allows his writing to remain as faithful as possible to both the character and meaning of the original This is not an art normally needed in documentary work But the analogy with documentary quotation in other ways sets a useful standard It is unfortunately not the usual practice in sociological studies quoting interviews to indicate cuts and other alterations Historians can, however, insist on the care normal in their own discipline, showing excisions by a dotted line, interpolations by brackets, and so on A re-ordering cannot be acceptable if it results in a new meaning, unintended by the speaker And the creation of semi fictional informants, by exchanging quotations between them, or dividing two from one, or creating one out of two, must always be by the standards of scholarship indefensible An oral documentary which does this may gain in effect, but it becomes imaginative literature a different kind of historical evidence

Oral historians in the United States have introduced an additional standard in their practice After transcription, typescripts are sent to the informant for correction [4] This clearly has advantages in picking up simple errors and misspellings of names It can also result in stimulating new information, and political historians who use the interview method often send transcripts for this purpose But it has drawbacks too Many informants find it impossible to resist rewriting the original conversational speech into a conventional prose form They also may delete sentences and rephrase others to change the impression given from some particular memory Since the original tapes are rarely consulted in American archives, and the transcript rather than the tape is regarded as the authoritative oral testimony, the process of correction weakens the authenticity of evidence in use In addition, while some retired public figures, may have the time

experience. Yet on the one hand biography as a form makes generalization difficult, while on the other, a wider analysis too easily becomes impersonal and divorced from real experience. We shall need to return to this question in considering interpretation: but it is also vital in relation to our choice of form.

There are broadly three ways in which oral history can be put together. The first is the single life-story narrative. For an informant with a rich memory it may well seem that no other choice can do the material full justice. Nor need a single life narrative present just one individual biography. In outstanding cases it can be used to convey the history of a whole class or community, or become a thread around which to reconstruct a highly complex series of events. Thus the autobiography of Nate Shaw in *All God's Dangers* is powerful just because it stands for the wider experience of the black people of the southern United States; while the entire reconstruction by Peter Friedlander of the forming of a car workers' trade union, in *The Emergence of a UAW Local 1936–1939*, is based upon the exceptional memory of a single worker, the union's first branch president, Edmund Kord.

The second form is a collection of stories. Since none of these need to be separately as rich or complete as a single narrative, this is a better way of presenting more typical life-history material. It also allows the stories to be used much more easily in constructing a broader historical interpretation, by grouping them—as a whole or fragmented—around common themes. Thus Oscar Lewis explores the family life of the Mexican city poor in *The Children of Sanchez*, by taking for one family the different accounts of parents and children and bringing them together into a single multi-dimensional picture. On a larger scale, a group of lives may be used to portray a whole community: a village, as in *Akenfield*, or a town, as in *Speak for England*. Or the collection may focus upon a single social group or theme, like *Fenwomen*, or *Working*. This approach has been very effectively used by local oral history projects, as, for example, in the *Broadsheet*[1] on domestic service published by an adult education group in

Oxfordshire, or the *Working Lives* of the People's Autobiography of Hackney.

The third form is that of cross-analysis: the oral evidence is treated as a quarry from which to construct an argument. It is of course possible within one book to combine analysis with the presentation of fuller life-stories. In my own *Edwardians*, a series of family portraits, chosen to represent the varied social classes and regions of Britain, is interwoven between the more directly analytical chapters. But wherever the prime aim becomes analysis, the overall shape can no longer be governed by the life-story form of the evidence, but must emerge from the inner logic of the argument. This will normally require much briefer quotations, with evidence from one interview compared with that from another. Usually —even with the help of footnotes—only a bare context for each quotation can be provided. Argument and cross-analysis are clearly essential for any systematic development of the interpretation of history. On the other hand, the loss in this form of presentation is equally clear. Because of this, these basic forms are not so much exclusive alternatives as complementary, and in many cases the same project needs to be brought out in more than one of them.

Another choice which arises naturally from the origin of oral evidence in the co-operation of an interview—and very often the carrying out of field-work by a group—is the possibility of a jointly edited publication. Indeed, in presentation through radio or television, teamwork is of course essential. Here the roles are clearly defined: technicians, producer, historian, interviewee. But with printed publications a more flexible approach is possible. For a school project, or a community oral history, the collective work in putting together oral material may be as valuable an experience as the recording itself. In a community project a group of old people may record each other's reminiscences, discuss them together, decide what to choose for publication, correct and elaborate the scripts, and so on. In a school ,„ ;
co-operation will be more likely over production:
the best extracts, design, and printing.

Similarly, oral evidence suggests a new look

which has existed for centuries between presentation in sound and in print. In the future it may become easier to combine both, issuing a tape of extracts, for example, to accompany a book. It is already common enough for booklets and printed programmes to be sent out as an aid to broadcasting. Nevertheless, for the moment oral history is normally presented in one of a number of distinct and separate conventional forms.

The first is the radio broadcast: sound only. There is a whole range of possibilities here, from the raw material itself in an autobiographical interview to the illustrated academic talk. Broadcasting has also developed a very special art of conveying scenes and messages in sound. Original tapes can be not merely clarified by cutting out hesitations and pauses, but heightened by rearrangements of words; and background noises can be inserted. Some of this amounts to a tampering with evidence which a historian ought not to accept, but the fine editing of a sound tape which becomes possible with the technical resources of broadcasting can certainly make quotation briefer and more effective. Sound can also make some cues superfluous, so that a series of extracts in different regional or class accents can be directly juxtaposed. Indeed a whole programme can be designed as a collage of sound with very little or no connecting narrative at all, and 'footnotes' perhaps supplied by the programme notes. In this way a historical picture of a community can be built up, such as a fishing town, interweaving the sounds of the herring gulls and the auctioneers at the quay, with old people's accounts of how the men caught fish, how the women gutted it and mended nets, stories, singing in the pubs, hymns, and preaching in church.

When pictures are also added in broadcasting, with television, there is a radical shift in what can be conveyed. The visual effects tend to dominate. Fine cutting is not possible in an interview unless a separate visual sequence is introduced, because otherwise there is likely to be a jump in the interviewee's physical position at each cut. But a separate visual sequence is distracting, conveying its own meanings. The same problems apply with a collage. Since the verbal

messages conveyed can be less easily clarified, and the pictorial meanings tend to be symbolic rather than precise, television presents argument in a more diffuse form than radio But seeing the informants themselves, and old photographs of their families, homes, and work-places, does bring another dimension of historical immediacy

Most of these forms in broadcasting can be relevant to a third area of oral history presentation—museum work the illustrated lecture, for example, in which tape excerpts can also be combined with slides, or the corner of a museum, where an automatically operated sound and slide show can be repeated to visitors at intervals during the day Here again there is a special form the linking of a museum display —a reconstructed room, or perhaps a single object—to a brief taped extract from an interview This can either be repeated automatically at intervals, or operated by a press-button, or visitors can be lent cassettes to carry round the building themselves The extract is best when very brief, less than a minute A labourer can speak about ploughing, or a weaver explain a loom In the Imperial War Museum you can hear the sound of marching and guns as you look at exhibits from the trenches, or enter a recruiting booth where an old soldier's voice recounts what it was like to be signed on

Local history work overlaps with that of museums, especially in lecturing, but also in publications Local booklets can be very effective when focused on a community or a special theme They probably make the most effective use of oral evidence when enough of the biographical detail is left to make the quotations a series of life-story sketches too Pictures in these booklets—which do not have to be taken in at the same time as the text—are an undoubted advantage Another useful outlet is the newspaper column on local history In the United States several local history societies print excerpts from interviews in a regular column, and this has been found 'especially popular with newcomers . . . who attempt to seek roots into a new community'[1] It can also stimulate new information from older readers

The lecture remains, both for teaching and elsewhere,

which it was collected, the forms of bias to which it is liable, and the methods of evaluation which are thus needed matters which are our next concern Above all, and always most challenging, to fully succeed as history an integration must be achieved of generality and detail, of theory and fact.

Writing a book which uses oral evidence, either alone or with other sources, thus does not in principle demand many particular skills beyond those needed for any historical writing The oral evidence can be evaluated, counted, compared, and cited along with the other material It is no more difficult, no easier But in some ways it is a different kind of experience As you write, you are aware of the people with whom you talked, you hesitate to give meanings to their words which they would wish to reject Humanly and socially, this is a proper caution, and indeed anthropologists have shown it equally essential to scientific understanding In writing, too, you strongly wish to share with others the insights and vividness of the life stories which have held your own imagination Moreover, this is material which you have not just discovered, but in one sense helped to create and is thus quite different from another document This is why an oral historian will always feel a specially strong tension between biography and cross analysis But this is a tension which rests on the strength of oral history The elegance of historical generalization, of sociological theory, flies high above the ordinary life experience in which oral history is rooted The tension which the oral historian feels is that of the mainspring between history and reality

The next stage is the evaluation of the material which has been collected We have earlier considered at some length, in the chapter on Evidence, the forms of bias to which oral sources are subject, and how far these are shared with documentary evidence But how in practice does the historian check the reliability of oral source material?

There are three basic precautions which must be taken First, each interview needs to be assessed for internal consistency It must be read as a whole If an

tendency to mythologize or to produce stereotyped generalizations, this will recur throughout an interview. The stories in it may then still be taken as symbolic evidence of attitudes, but not as reliable in factual detail, as they might be with another informant. Similarly, suppression of information can be revealed by a repeated avoidance of discussion of a particular area—or through unresolved contradictions of detail (such as date of marriage, and the birthdate and later age of a first child, which was conceived before marriage). Any extensive suppression or invention will produce extremely obvious inconsistencies, contradictions, and anachronisms, especially if the interview takes more than one session. In such a case, it is best to discard the entire interview. On the other hand, some inconsistencies are quite normal. It is very common to find a conflict between the general values which are believed true of the past and the more precise record of day-to-day life; but this contradiction can be in itself highly revealing, for it may represent one of the dynamics of social change—and a perception which is, in fact, rarely possible through any other source than oral evidence. On a more humdrum level, memory is in general less precisely reliable on a matter of chronology, or a brief once-for-all incident, than on the detail of a recurrent process of work or social or domestic life. By contrast, a small minority of informants can be found whose richness and consistency of memory is absolutely exceptional. Because it is so extensive, the accuracy of such a memory is easier to confirm from other sources: a list of land occupiers, for example, from the rate books; or the year of a local suicide might be traced back to a newspaper report. But even with such cases, as with others, by first looking at the interview as a whole, you can arrive at a good measure of the general reliability of the informant as a witness.

On many points a cross-check can be made with other sources. This can of course be a cumulative process as material is gathered in: a series of interviews from the same locality will provide numerous factual cross-checks between each other. Details can similarly be compared with manuscript and printed sources. '*Any* evidence', as Jan Vansina puts it,

written or oral, which goes back to *one* source should be regarded as on probation; corroboration for it must be sought.'[4] This dictum may, however, be of more general relevance to oral tradition handed down over several generations than to direct life-story evidence. Where there are discrepancies between written and oral evidence, it does not follow that one account is necessarily more reliable than another. The interview may reveal the truth behind the official record. Or the divergence may represent two perfectly valid accounts from different standpoints, which together provide vital clues towards the true interpretation. Very often, indeed, while oral evidence which can be directly confirmed proves to be of merely illustrative value, it is fresh but unconfirmed evidence which points the way towards a new interpretation. Indeed, much oral evidence, springing from direct personal experience—like an account of domestic life in a particular family—is valuable precisely because it could come from no other source. It is inherently unique. Of course its authenticity can be weighed. It cannot be confirmed, but it can be judged.

The third method by which such a judgement can be reached is by placing the evidence in a wider context. An experienced historian will already have learnt enough from contemporary sources about the time, place, and social class from which an interview comes to know, even if a specific detail is unconfirmable, whether as a whole it rings true. General absence of reliable detail, anachronistic attitudes, and incongruous linguistic phrasing will all be obvious enough. And it is possible with more special techniques to push further than this. For example, an expert in dialect may be able to identify exactly the extent to which an informant has kept or modified the local vocabulary of his or her birthplace. Or a folklorist may be able to pick out stories which are versions of known tales, distinguishing the elements in them which are unaltered and those which are new. Indeed, as a whole, interviews may be subjected to a form of literary analysis, which could help to distinguish the formal structure of the narrative from its factual detail and symbolic message. But this is a method which remains to be developed.

At the other extreme, a group of interviews can be tested by a purely quantitative assessment of some of the basic information which they contain, to see if this is consistent with information from other sources. This can provide a very useful yardstick of how far the collection might be trusted on other points where no such comparison was possible. In a recently completed study of 'The Family and Community Life of East Anglian Fishermen', for example, Trevor Lummis has put some of the basic information collected from sixty interviews into tabular form.[5] Informants were asked the age at which they left school. Their answers fit neatly with known national trends, both with time and across social class:

	Born			Son of		
% left school	before 1889	1890–9	1900–9	owner	deep sea skipper	deep sea crewman
at 11 or 12	36	15	7	0	16	33
at 13	53	33	36	22	69	33
at 14 or 15	11	52	57	78	15	33

Information had also been collected on the number of informant's brothers and sisters, and whether any died in childhood. Fishermen are known to have been unusually slow in reducing family size. When tabulated, the figures again prove compatible with national trends towards lower infant mortality and fewer children—as again they are with known differences between social classes:

	Born			Father		
	before 1899	1890–9	1900–9	owner	deep sea skipper	deep sea crewman
Number of brothers and sisters	9·9	7·0	7·9	9·1	8·5	9·5
% who died as children	15	14	7	11	15	25

The historian with such test results at his elbow can move forward with some confidence into less charted terrain.

At this stage, some will be looking for patterns, clues towards interpretation, in the facts before them. Others will have started from a more definite theoretical standpoint, and

probably some more detailed lesser hypotheses too—hunches which they wish to test. But both will eventually need to look for some form of proof. In general, a historical interpretation or account becomes credible when the pattern of evidence is consistent, and is drawn from more than one viewpoint. Great care needs to be taken with each of these conditions. Thus a single 'case study' is almost inevitably a weaker base for arguing general historical interpretations than a comparison between two or more groups, each with different characteristics, at the same period. A comparison between different groups over time is stronger still, although harder to achieve. The more that an argument can be shown to hold under varying conditions, the more convincing the proof. However, since history is made up of a multitude of cases, almost all of which are unique in more than one way, it is in practice often very difficult to make useful comparisons. The proof of the explanation must then be sought from within the single case: the evidence counter-checked as far as possible in detail, and the likelihood of overall bias in it weighed. For example, in a recent study of Frontier College, the great Canadian experiment in working-class educational self-help, George Cook found himself forced to accept that he was collecting within a single broad perspective:

> Generally speaking, we are hearing from those who want to help the college. Although many felt that they had 'failed' as labourer-teachers, they remain convinced that it was a 'noble idea' and reflect favourably on their experiences. They have rose-tinted glasses. Many of course . . . are acutely conscious of this bias, but just as many are totally unaware of it. We have not been able to reach those who have negative views . . . the early employers . . . (or) any of the early union men who worked with the college. Most importantly, we cannot find any of the labourers . . . Who *were* the people who wanted the 'B.A., Frontier College'? To some extent, these gaps can be resolved through the labourer-teachers' own field reports and registers, but even the most comprehensive report is seen through the labourer-teacher's and not the labourer's eyes. We shall probably learn little or nothing about what *they* thought.[6]

ay, it would be difficult, in a study of work

experience, to obtain a critical view from long-service employees who had given their lives to the enterprise, and only done so because they were prepared to accept its conditions. The upper servants of a country house provide an example. Yet while such employees are relatively easy to locate, the transient workers who may even have outnumbered them are inevitably much harder to trace. Nor, it must be strongly emphasized, will the use of written documents necessarily compensate for such an imbalance in the oral evidence. John Toland founded his new sympathetic portrait of *Adolf Hitler* as 'a warped archangel', a misunderstood, 'complex and contradictory' character, on interviews with 250 survivors of Hitler's own circle.[7] He had no difficulty in buttressing it from the German archives. It would have been a different matter had he chosen to encounter some of Hitler's opponents and victims.

A special caution is also needed if counting it to be used as part of the proof, because of the difficulties in retrospective sampling. Tabulation can be a very valuable way of classifying and disciplining one's impressions of the contents of a number of interviews. A careful scrutiny of interview material with a coding frame in mind can indeed force a much more precise consideration of what one is trying to show and what evidence the interviews can offer. On the other hand, even with interviews collected on a representative sample basis, it is best to stick to the simpler forms of analysis and not venture beyond straightforward percentages and strong correlation patterns. For example, Trevor Lummis analysed a set of thirty-five interviews for an Open University programme on 'Historical Data and the Social Sciences', concerning the decline of domestic service in the early twentieth century.[8] It has been suggested that one reason for this decline might have been that middle-class employers wanted a more private family life, and that the presence of servants increased distance between family members. A first look at the interviews suggested, however, that the social gulfs within the household were less marked when it contained young children. Deciding to take daily eating habits as a test, he was able to produce the following tabulations:

Household with	Households where servants ate apart from employers	Households where servants shared at least one meal a day
	%	%
one servant & children	8	92
one servant without children	80	20
two servants & children	67	33
two servants without children	100	0

These figures show quite conclusively that within such households the presence of children does reduce social separation at mealtimes. They also suggest that the number of servants in the household may also be critical, but they do not prove this: it would require more figures from larger households to do so. Similarly, to take an imaginary case: if the question was under what circumstances married women were more likely to drink in pubs, and the interviews showed that 5 per cent did so in Scotland and 15 per cent in England, while over both countries together the figures were 20 per cent for towns and 10 per cent for the countryside, it would seem clear that urbanization was one factor, and there were also regional differences. But if the interviews indicated that 22 per cent of women drank in pubs in the cotton towns, as against 18 per cent in mining settlements, this could provide a useful hint towards another factor, but no more.

In taking such examples we are already considering how, through analysis, an interpretation might be developed. But they also suggest how analysis, by raising new questions, can point to the need for further field-work. We cannot in fact make the neat separation which we have so far assumed. The ideal situation is very different: a continuous development through the to and fro of big theories, small hunches, and the practical strategy of field-work. What was initially seen as the main problem may turn out to be a misconception, a dead end; as the field-work continues, the emphasis is

another area of questioning, or a different key group of informants is sought out. Alternatively, the original theory does not fit the facts discovered. Can the theory be modified? Or is it better to look at the facts from another quite different perspective? There is, of course, no set procedure by which such a developing search for interpretation can be carried forward. By definition it demands flexibility and imagination. Not all will succeed. Scaling the historical heights is dangerous. And few really interesting problems are ever *finally* solved. Nevertheless, in the imaginative combination of interpretation and field-work, the individual historian does have a particular advantage over the large-scale research project. It is a well-known defect of large-scale operations that although they can encompass a much wider range of possible explanations and sources, they cannot be subjected to such subtle control and modification in detail. They set out from an established research design, team work is organized on that basis, time is finite and the field-work must be completed well before the first draft of the final report is written. Yet once the analysis of field-work is started, it becomes clear that much of the material is of little interest, but if only that particular area had been more deeply explored ... The individual historian will not be satisfied without that further search.

One can put this in another way, by comparing the historian with a scientist. Scientific research advances through a meandering sequence of general theory, observations and hunches, experiments, working hypotheses tested by further experiments, dead ends, and further hunches and tests, until at last one hypothesis stands up to all conditions, and, if appropriate, a reformulation of theory is then sought. Any historical work suffers the inevitable disadvantage of having to work from the real cases available rather than from specially created experiments. But the big project, especially when using a field-work survey, is additionally handicapped by telescoping into one all the experimental steps of the central stages of research development. It thus stands in danger of purchasing its greater resources at the expense of —to use Jan Vansina's phrase—'the power of systematic

doubt in historical inquiry': the very essence of creative advance in historical interpretation.

All this is somewhat abstract. Let us consider an example of the interaction between theory and field-work in practice. Peter Friedlander has set out unusually clearly, in the introduction to *The Emergence of a UAW Local 1936–1939, A Study in Class and Culture*, how his research proceeded.[9] He had at his disposal at the start certain facts—like gross census figures, dates, and a bare narrative from contemporary documents; and also various general theories—such as the Marxism of class struggle underlying labour history, and from Max Weber the concepts of rationality and individualism as essential to a bourgeois epoch. But the gaps were enormous. There was no documentary evidence of attitudes in the factory to authority and how this changed as the trade union was organized; of who made up the inner circle of union leaders and how they were related to social groups within the factory and whether these leaders led or reflected opinion; or of which were in fact the key social groups of workers in the factory, how their attitudes to the union struggle varied, and how it affected their personal lives and outlooks. Equally, the theoretical concepts failed to meet. This trade union struggle took place not merely within a highly developed industrial capitalist society. The majority of the workers had migrated into the city where they worked from quite different social contexts. Their fight to unionize was thus also part of a much wider transformation of social cultures in migrant families and individuals: in this case religious-minded Slavs, revolutionary Croatian nationalists, Yankee and Scots artisans, Appalachian farm families and urbanized American blacks. These specific cultural sub-groups were in the event to provide the key to interpretation. Yet, as Friedlander observes,

> labour historiography, which has tended to assume the presence of a modern, individuated, rational worker, has usually viewed the process of unionization in narrowly rational, institutional, and goal-orientated terms. The problem of culture and praxis is passed over in silence.

Even where an explicitly Marxist framework is used in labour history, the tendency is for a whole section of society to be conceived of as an individual, and the problem is then to explain the institutional formation as the outcome of a rational process within the consciousness of this *quasi* individual. In essence, a historical formation is reduced to being the utilitarian consequence of willful behaviour on the part of a rational individual.

But it is not always easy to locate this expected rationality; nor to explain its shortfall *in a particular case* in terms of general theoretical concepts such as, for example, 'false consciousness':

At each juncture where a gap is seen between the abstractions of the political economy of work, and the concrete reality of individual, peer group, gang, clique, family, and neighbourhood—of character and culture—there appear *ad hoc* psychological notions invested with an astonishingly ubiquitous explanatory power. Such notions ignore one of the basic problems of historical thought: the nature of relationships among these many layers of social reality ... the complex structure of cultures and relationships that develop and interact.

As the research proceeded, it emerged that only the older-established American skilled Protestant workers could be described in classic individualistic and rationalistic terms. This group supplied most of the leadership, although it also included many who felt no interest in the union. The Appalachians also acted as individuals, but principally on a moral basis: they joined the union relatively late, when they believed that its cause was *right*, and once having joined were as utterly loyal as to their religious sects. The older East European migrants were much more concerned with what was right or wrong in social or ethical terms for the community, and acted explicitly as a group. Although personally cowed and submissive, they disliked the foremen and the management, and became dependable supporters of the union leadership. Their children, by contrast, were much more active and outspoken, and in particular a group of young Poles who belonged to neighbourhood gangs played a special role in the struggle. Like the older Slavs, they acted

together, but with little social and political consciousness they were pragmatic, opportunistic—the uncontrollable militant wildcatters willing to break a contract by striking, and then to man the flying picket squad It was as if the union to them was 'a bigger and better gang

It was only when these groups and their attitudes had been identified, that the narrative of the struggle could be meaningfully reconstructed Yet not only was none of this information available at the start, but it was not even known to be needed The discovery of information and development of an interpretation went forward hand in hand as, over a period of eighteen months, Friedlander talked with the union leader, Edmund Kord Kord had an exceptionally full and accurate memory, and indeed, remembered more as his mind became increasingly focused on these past years Friedlander spent a full week with him three times, and each of these prolonged sessions produced drafts, comments, questions, and discussion One of the two intervals between sessions included six hours of recorded telephone discussion, another produced altogether seventy five pages of correspondence They had to create between them not just the facts which were needed, but a mutual understanding and language of exchange In one sense, as Friedlander observes, the information came like any other facts used by historians because 'someone asked a question of reality' But it is more fundamentally significant that the answers emerged from the interchange of theory and fact in a 'critical dialogue' between the two men

Friedlander draws from his experience a view which is rather less convincing that the historian should be seeking not so much specific explanations leading to a set of basic general concepts, in which the information is reduced and simplified to fit the concepts, as 'meaningful description', in which the role of theory is to enable elaboration and increasing complexity He calls this 'thick description' It does not, however, seem a very helpful conclusion, and indeed could lead straight back towards a blind empiricism For exactly the same reason the claim sometimes made by adv [illegible] of 'people's history' that their material is so real that

mediating influences of parents, brothers and sisters, and the wider family, of peer groups and neighbours, school and religion, newspapers and the media, art and culture Only when the precise role of these intermediary institutions in, for example, socialization into sex and class roles, has been established, will a theoretical integration become a possibility Until then we can only guess how far the economic and social system moulds personality, or the system is itself shaped by basic biological drives A beginning to such work can be seen, especially in women's history—but it would be foolish to claim more than this as yet. It represents, nevertheless, for the future probably the greatest challenge and contribution which oral evidence may offer to the making of history

Let us end with a brief look forward into that future What in fact can we hope for in the making of history? To begin with, a shift of focus in the present debate about oral history At present this is concerned chiefly with the problems of a relatively new method and the reliability of the evidence which it produces While some of it is helpful and necessary, there is also too much which is mostly negative and designedly cynical We can be certain, however, that with time the development of the method itself will be consolidated and the value of its evidence inescapable Oral evidence will become accepted as one among many other historical sources, assumed to be neither more nor less intrinsically trustworthy, but like them subject to the normal processes of historical evaluation This does not mean that the debate about the reliability of evidence should cease, but that it should be extended It would be an excellent consequence of oral history if it brought more awareness of the fallibility of historical evidence in general, not merely on points of detail, but *especially because of the extent to which all are moulded* by individual perception and selected through social bias, thus conveying partisan messages of prejudice and power It would follow, too, that the argument was not confined to the nature of evidence or the methods of o   inr   but

concerned the social and political purposes of history itself. This is a much more fundamental question which historians have evaded for far too long.

The acceptance of oral evidence will bring about a change in the resources available to historians. It will become a normal rather than exceptional element in the county record office or the city library local collection. There will be 100 substantial local oral archives in Britain in the place of the present twenty; in the United States perhaps 500 where there are now 100; and so on. There will be fully organized national sound archives, too, following the lead of countries like Sweden, Holland, and Canada. The problem of transcription will remain, but it will also change. At the moment, even in the United States, roughly half the recorded evidence collected by oral historians is untranscribed—and it is hardly likely that at any given moment in the future there will not remain a substantial backlog as field-work goes on. But the cumulative amount of transcribed material available to the historian will go on growing, not just from current research projects, but also as earlier untranscribed deposits become, with time, of increasing value, until either a voluntary local historian, or the archive itself, decides to put them on paper.

These resources will affect both the teaching and the writing of history. At present it requires unusual effort and imagination for a school-teacher or a history lecturer to use recordings in teaching, or a museum to incorporate them into a historical display: breathing life into an arrangement of dead objects—however faithful as a reconstruction of a cottage room, a bar, a recruiting office, or a clogger's workshop—with the immediacy of the human voice. Unique, often disarmingly simple, epigrammatic, yet at the same time representative, the voice can as no other means bring the past into the present. And no doubt its best use will always be in a particular, specially prepared context, like such a museum display, or in a radio programme, or arising from a creative educational project. But it has a place in more straightforward learning and teaching, too, which has yet to be realized. We have recently seen a prolific growth in the

visual evidence of the past available through publications of books of photographs There will in time be a parallel development in sound, so that eventually it becomes relatively easier to find an extract published on tape of a particular person, event, or theme in either political or social history

The photograph has created a new type of visual history, compelling, but in its human message enigmatic The voice is explicit Its use changes not only the texture of history, but its content It shifts the focus from laws, statistics, administrators, and governments, to people The balance is altered politics and economics can now be seen—and thus judged—from the receiving end, as well as from above And it becomes possible to answer previously closed questions extending established fields such as political history, intellectual history, economic and social history, adding to other newer areas of inquiry—working-class history, women's history, family history, the history of racial and other minorities, the history of the poor and of the illiterate—a whole new dimension We have already in existing titles—*Akenfield, Where Beards Wag All, Working, Workless, Pit men, Preachers and Politics, From Mouths of Men, Dennison Street, The Classic Slum, Below Stairs, The Children of Sanchez, All God's Dangers, The Leaping Hare*—the first swallows of a new summer As others follow, history will be changed and enriched

The new balance to the content of history, and the sources of its evidence, will alter its judgement, and so, eventually, its message as public myth We shall find from the past a different set of heroes ordinary people as well as leaders, women as well as men, black as well as white History, which once could only weep for a King Charles I on the scaffold, can now share grief with the old illiterate widower, Nate Shaw, twice-arrested black Alabama sharecropper, at the loss of his wife Hannah

I just felt like my very heart was gone. I'd stayed with her forty-odd years, and that was short, short—except bein pulled off and put in prison I picked her out amongst the girls in this country and it was the easiest thing in the world to do .

Christian girl when I married her. And she was a woman that wanted to keep as far as her hands and arms could reach, all the surroundings, she wanted to keep it clean. And I've kept myself clean as I possibly could. But in past days, I've sneaked about in places, I did. I own to my part of wrongness . . . I liked women, but . . . I desperately kept clean of runnin too much to a extreme at other women when I had her. Regardless of all circumstances, I weren't a man to slip around at women and no matter what I said to another woman or what I done, I let my wife come first . . . I'm praisin her now, I'm praisin her for what she was—she was a mother for her children, she was a mother for for her children—and when they put me in prison, the whole twelve years, she stayed by her children, she didn't waver . . . I loved that gal and she dearly proved she loved me. She stuck right to me every day of her life and done a woman's duty. Weren't a lazy bone in her body and she was strict to herself and truthful to me. Every step she took, to my knowledge, was in my favor. There's a old word that a man don't ever miss his water until his well go dry . . .[10]

There will be more biographies like Nate Shaw's. Whose, we can only guess. A London West Indian bus conductor; a British Leyland assembly-line car worker; a Belfast boilermaker's wife; a supermarket checker-out; a Welsh sheep-farmer; a Pittsburgh steelmaker; a Californian telephonist; a New South Wales truckdriver . . . Who knows? Or what particular questions oral history will succeed in solving. The riddle of British working-class Toryism? Whether the old family firm was an economic asset or a handicap? How far industrialization emancipated women, or confined them as housewives to still more limiting male domination? What makes some social groups prefer to educate, and others to beat their children? How some persecuted immigrant minorities prosper, and others not? In what social context are major scientific discoveries made? To each of these problems, oral history could make a critical contribution. Which are chosen depends on who sees this first.

In principle, the possibilities of oral history extend into every historical field. But they are more fundamental to some than to others. And they provide an underlying current: towards a history which is more personal, more social, and

more democratic. This affects not only published history, but the process by which it is written The historian, as we have seen, is brought into touch with fellow-scholars in other disciplines social anthropology, dialect and literature, political science The academic is prised from his closet into the outside world The hierarchy of higher and lower institutions, of teachers and taught, breaks down in joint research Old and young are brought into exchange and closer sympathy The classics of oral history will no doubt continue to be created by uncategorizable individuals, and the change in the process of historical writing will proceed quietly, mostly unnoticed by the book reviewers Nevertheless there will be increasingly small oral history groups, and local history societies, and school and student projects, bringing out their own publications Sometimes it will be a properly printed community history, complete with photographs More often it will be just stencilled, on cheap paper The outsider who can read it will usually find something of interest, but only a local can make the most of all its detail It may be a history of the street and its families, of a factory's workers and owner, about a strike, or a bomb explosion, recollections of past leisure, education, or domestic service These local publications will gather new historical material for the future, which would have been otherwise lost Indeed, any interview of substance, deposited in a local archive or published, has a potential value for the future It is like tapping the water of a river at the sea's mouth The far limit of the past recoverable through oral evidence recedes remorselessly through death, day by day But the real justification of history is not in giving an immortality to a few of the old It is part of the way in which the living understand their place and part in the world Landmarks, landscapes, patterns of authority and of conflict have all been found fragile in the twentieth century By helping to show how their own stories fit into the changing character of the place in which they live, their problems as workers or as parents, history can help people to see how they stand, and where they should go This is what lies behind the present c
f recent history in Britain It also poin

key social and political importance of oral history. It provides a new basis for original projects, not just by professionals, but by students, by schoolchildren, or by the people of a community. They do not just have to learn their own history; they can write it. Oral history gives history back to the people in their own words. And in giving a past, it also helps them towards a future of their own making.

Further Reading and Notes

These suggestions for further reading and notes follow the subject pattern of the chapters. For a general introduction, two books stand out: Jan [illegible] [illegible] East Anglia. However, the most rewarding sources for the continuing development of oral history are journals: notably *Oral History, the journal of the Oral History Society* (Department of Sociology, Essex University, Colchester, England); the *Oral History Review* and *Newsletter of the Oral History Association* U.S.A. (P.O. Box [illegible], North Texas State University, [illegible] Oral History [illegible] [illegible], Wellington St, Ottawa, Ontario). In addition, rewarding oral history material is published regularly by *Sound Heritage* (Provincial Archives of Canada, Victoria, British Columbia) and *Foxfire* (Rabun Gap, Georgia [illegible]); information on sound archives in the *Phonographic Bulletin* [illegible] Hengeveldstraat 29, Utrecht, Netherlands [illegible] in oral history by the *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* (Warwick University, Coventry, England) and *History Workshop* (P.O. Box 69, Oxford OX2 7XA, England). [illegible] for the United States, from the Oral History Association, a *Directory* (ed. Gary Shumway, 1971) and a *Bibliography* [illegible] 1973).

Abbreviations: *Oral History*—*OH*; *Oral History Review*—*OHR*; Canadian Oral History Association—COHA; *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*—*BSSLH*; *History Workshop*—*HW*.

Place of publication is only given for works which were not published in London.

Chapter 1 History and the Community

1. *OH*, 1, 2, p. 5.
2. *OH*, 1, 4, p. 57.

Chapter 2 Historians and Oral History

For oral history in non-literate societies, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition*; D. F. McCall. *Africa in Time Perspective*, 1964; D. L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad*, Berkeley, 1959. For the changing character of perception in the first age of printing, Robert Mandrou, *Introduction to Modern France 1500–1640, An Essay in Historical psychology*, 1975. Scott, Aubrey, and Gough are discussed in George Ewart Evans, *From Mouths of Men*, 1976; for the subsequent development of local history, see Raphael Samuel, 'Oral History and Local History', *History Workshop*, 1. For the early development of social survey methods in Britain and Europe, see Anthony Oberschall, *Empirical Social Research in Germany 1848–1914*, 1965; and Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld, and Hans Zeisel, *Marienthal*, trans. 1972, p. 100ff. For autobiography in Germany, see Oberschall; in France, T. Zeldin, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 June 1977. For historians: J. W. Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*. New York, 1942. Full accounts of related developments in folklore are provided by R. M. Dorson (ed.), *Folklore Research Around the World*, Bloomington, 1961; Folke Hedblom, 'Methods and Organization of Dialect and Folklore Research in Sweden'; Sean O'Sullivan, 'The Work of the Irish Folklore Commission'; Alan Bruford, 'The Archive of the School of Scottish Studies'; Stanley Ellis, 'The Survey of English Dialects and Social History'; 'An Introduction to the work of the (Leeds) Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies', *OH*, 2, 2, and 4, 1; and Oral History Association, *Selections from the Fifth and Sixth National Colloquia on Oral History*, 1972. For oral history in the context of the rapprochment of history and sociology, see the review article, Martin Bulmer, 'Sociology and History: Some Recent Trends', *Sociology*, 8, 1, pp. 137–50. For fuller surveys of the oral history movement in various regions: Paul Thompson, 'oral History in North America'; Rolf Schuursma, 'The Sound Archive of the Film and Science Foundation and the Dutch Radio Organisation'; Paul Thompson, 'The Bologna Conference' and 'Oral History in Israel'; Andrew Roberts, 'The Use of Oral Sources for African History', *OH*, 3, 1; 1, 2; 5, 1, pp. 21 and 35 ff.; and 4, 1.

For a brief list of pioneering examples of oral history before 1945: Bede, *History of the English Church and People*; John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*; Richard Gough, *Human Nature Displayed in the History of Myddle*, 1833—oral local history of *c.* 1700; among novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, and Arnold Bennett's *Clayhanger*; in social history, Jules Michelet, *Le Peuple*, Paris, 1846; as studies of poverty, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1851, and B. S. Rowntree and B. Lasker, *Unemployment: a Social Study*, 1911; F. Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, 1845—the first Marxist field-work; as rural history, George Sturt, *Change in the Village*, 1912; in labour history, S. and B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, 1894; among autobiographies, Paul Radin, *Crashing Thunder*, 1926 and Lilias Rider Haggard, *I Walked by Night, Being the Life and History of the King of the Norfolk Poachers*, 1935; in community studies,

Harvey Zorbaugh, *Gold Coast and Slum*, 1929, and C M Arensberg and

1 Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, Paris, 1847, 2, p 530 'la tradition orale', Thompson, 2, p 241
2 Haley, 'Black History, Oral History and Genealogy', *OHR*, 1973, pp 14–17
3 Trans. L. Shirley-Price, 1955, p 34.
4 p 69
5 *Works*, trans W F Fleming, New York, 1927 V, p 62, XI, p 9 and XVIII, pp 6, 8 and 15, Thompson, 2, p 67
6 Trans R. Rawlinson, 1728, pp 276–8
7 Thompson, 2, p 67
8 1, pp 382–4, 418

Myddle Under the Tudors and Stuarts, Leicester, 1974.
12 Oberschall, p 81 For England Smith, *The Working Man's Way in*

Devil, interspersed with local descriptions, Gainsborough, 1793 The *How I Became a Socialist* series of the 1890s illustrates the conversion testimonial in reverse. For a French example, *Martin Nadaud Memoires de Léonard, ancien garçon maçon*, Paris, 1895, and (M Agulhon, ed), 1977 Göhre's German series started with Carl Fischer, *Denkwürdigkeiten und Erinnerungen eines arbeiters*, Leipzig, 1904—a brick factory worker One of the classics of the new genre was subsequently translated into English Adelhaid Popp, *The Autobiography of a Working Woman*, 1912
13 1797, p ii
14 Eileen Yeo, 'Mayhew as a Social Investigator', E P Thompson and E. Yeo (eds.), *The Unknown Mayhew*, 1971, pp 54–63
15. Mary Higgs, *Glimpse into the Abyss*, 1906, Jack London, *The People of the Abyss*, 1903, George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933, Sherard, pp 41–3, Harold Wright (ed), *Letters of Stephen Reynolds*, 1923 p 109, to Tom Woolley, 25 October 1908, and *Daily News*, 22 May 1923 See also the perceptive preface to *Seems So!*
16. *Our Partnership*, 1948, pp 27 and 158, Margaret Cole, *Beatrice Webb*, 1945 p 59
17 *Economic Journal*, XVI, p 522
18. *A Brief Account of the Literary Undertakings of Hubert Howe Bancroft*, 1893, J W. Caughley, *Hubert Howe Bancroft, Historian of the West*,

Berkeley, 1946; Willa Baum, 'Oral History: a revived tradition at the Bancroft Library', *Pacific North West Quarterly*, April 1967, pp. 57–64.

19. pp. v, 3, 520.
20. pp. iv–vi, 1, 5 and 11. David Hume and Edward Gibbon worked with similar care.
21. H. P. Rickman (ed.), *Meaning in History*, 1961, pp. 85–6.
22. Trans. G. G. Berry, p. 17.
23. Acton's letter to contributors: Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History*, New York, 1956, p. 247.
24. Langlois and Seignobos, pp. 129, 134, 155, 175, 196; Collingwood, p. 131.
25. *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848–1918*, Oxford, 1954, pp. 569–72.
26. *Listener*, 1 February 1973, p. 148; *English History 1914–45*, Oxford, 1945, p. 609; *Struggle for Mastery*, p. 574.
27. B. Malinowski, 'Myth in Primitive Psychology', in W. R. Dawson (ed.), *The Frazer Lectures*, 1932, p. 97; cf. *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, 1927, p. 104; Radin, p. viii.
28. pp. ix–x. *Somebody* was also playing with such ideas in New York: witness the caricature of Professor Sea Gull, with his vast project of 'An Oral History of Our Time', an informal history of 'the shirt-sleeved multitude', incomplete after 26 years barroom tippling and flophouse dossing, of Joseph Mitchell's *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, 1938, pp. 68–86.
29. Paul Thompson, 'The BBC Sound Archives', *OH*, 1, 2, pp. 11–18—and a prime source for Asa Briggs, *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, 1961; others were A. J. P. Taylor and Theo Barker.
30. *SSRC Newsletter*, 31, July 1976, p. 6.
31. *From Mouths of Men*, p. 187.
32. *OH*, 1, 3, p. 46.
33. p. 142.

Chapter 3 The Achievement of Oral History

Economic History: Christopher Storm-Clark, 'The Miners, 1870–1970: a Test-Case for Oral History', *Victorian Studies*, XV, 1; Gould Colman, 'Theoretical Models and Oral History Interviews', *Agricultural History*, 41, July 1967; Allan Nevins, *Ford*, 1954–62; George Ewart Evans, *Where Beards Wag All*, the foundry, migrant brewery labour, craftsmen; for itinerant trades, research in progress, Colin Bundy, Dermot Healy, and Bill Williams, Manchester Polytechnic; for fishing, George Ewart Evans, *The Days That We Have Seen*, 1975; Trevor Lummis, 'The Occupational Community of East Anglian Fishermen', *British Journal of Sociology*, XXVIII, 1, March 1977, and SSRC Research Report, 'The Family and Community Life of East Anglian Fishermen'; Peter Frank, 'Women's

Work in the Yorkshire Inshore Fishing Industry', and P J Edwards and Jean Marshall, 'Sources of Conflict in the Trawling Industries of Hull and Grimsby Between the Wars', *OH*, 4, 1, and 5

On agriculture, George Ewart Evans, *The Horse in the Furrow*, 1960, *The Farm and the Village*, 1969 and *Where Beards Wag All*, David Jenkins, *The Agricultural Community in South West Wales at the turn of the 20th Century*, 1971, Carol Faiers, 'Persistence and Change in Farming Methods in a Suffolk Village', *OH*, 4, 2 See also rural social history below

On the entrepreneur Thea Vigne, SSRC Research Report, 'Middle and Upper Class Families in the early 20th Century', single examples are Nevins, *Ford*, and George Ewart Evans, *From Mouths of Men*, pp 21–30, on small businessmen, T Vigne and A. Howkins, 'The small shopkeeper in industrial and market towns', in G Crossick (ed), *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870–1914*, 1977

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Radio Astronomy ...

Life in Medicine ...

Olch, 'Science ... Oral History Association, *Fourth National Colloquium on Oral History*, New York, ...

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Lower Mid... ..., Clive Field, 'A Sociological Profile of English Methodism', *OH*, 4, 1, Robert Towler and Audrey Chamberlain, 'Common Religion', *Sociological Year Book of Religion in Britain*, 6, 1973 Also the immense secondary literature in folklore—see references in Chapter 2 and below

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OH, 5, 2. On the unemployed: Studs Terkel, *Hard Times*, 1970; Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years*, Toronto, 1973; Dennis Marsden and E. Duff, *Workless*, 1973; Ray Broomhill, 'Using Oral Sources in writing a social history of the unemployed during the Depression in South Australia', in Joan Campbell (ed.), *Oral History 75*, Latrobe, 1975; John Saville, 'Interviews in Labour History', *OH*, 1.

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Chapter 7 Storing and Sifting

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1. Baum, pp. 41–4; the Oral History Association guideline is less precise, p. 46; she writes of the American legal situation generally concerning oral history, pp. 47–8, that libel is defined as the publication 'of false utterance, without just cause, and which tends to expose the other to public hatred, contempt, or ridicule. Various court cases have progressively reduced the possibility of a court finding any historical effort either slanderous or libelous. First, the dead cannot be libeled. Second, libelous defamation of prominent living persons must include actual malice plus irresponsible disregard for truth.

   The researcher or interviewer may need to be a little more concerned if his questioning leads him into the purely private lives of prominent or not-prominent persons, although he still has a good defense if he can indicate this is truth published for good motives. Of course, there always exists the possibility of harassment in the lower courts through filing of suits for defamation. Such suits stand almost no possibility of ending in court award for damages but they could cost time and expense to the researcher in defending himself. But to all intents and purposes, slander or libel is a non-existent danger to an oral history project. It is the project's reputation for responsible work that needs guarding, not its legal liability'.

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decision of New York State Court of Appeals in Ernest Hemingway's Estate v Random House (1968) not to prevent publication by Hemingway's writer friend A. E Hotchner of conversations which he had noted (not taped) with him. This decision, that 'Ernest Hemingway impliedly licensed his rights under common law copyright when he knowingly permitted Hotchner to interview him', brings the United States, according to James W Wilkie, into line with the 'common-sense position' which 'appears to hold true throughout Latin America'—and certainly in Mexican procedure—that 'intellectual authorship is held by the interviewer' (*Research in Mexican History* p 55)

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4 With of course an explanatory letter which seeks to avoid some of the difficulties which follow The Aural History Institute's example (*ibid*, p 49) includes this paragraph

Please read the transcript, remembering that it is a record of the spoken, rather than the written word Change any incorrect dates, misspelled names or misinformation, correction of grammar is not recommended as it would distort the oral record. If you discover that you have omitted information concerning specific instances, add it in the margin or on additional sheets of paper Similarly, if you wish to clarify statements that you have made, please add the information to the transcript.

Chapter 8 Interpretation: the Making of History

or analysis, and the role of theory in field work, see Jan Vansina, 'The ower of Systematic Doubt in Historical Enquiry', *History in Africa*, 1, 974 pp 109–27, Peter Friedlander, introduction to *The Emergence of a* All *Local 1936–1939*, Pittsburgh, 1975, and Martin Bulmer (ed.), *…logical Research Methods*, 1977 For quantitative analysis in oral history, especially Trevor Lummis, SSRC Research Report, 'The Family and …mmunity Life of East Anglian Fishermen' For psychology, social …ory and oral history, see Phil Cohen *et al*, 'Angels of History—Backs …e Storm', *Aspects of the Youth Question*, 1977

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1 *Broadsheet* 4, from Ed Coker, Rewley House, Wellington Square, Oxford.

2 Baum, p 58.

3 Copying requires two tape recorders and a connecting lead The master tape is placed on one recorder and a clean tape on the second recorder, and the lead is inserted into the appropriate sockets so that the second recorder is recording sound from the first. No microphone

is required; this is a direct process, and the sound from the tape on the first machine will be reproduced through the speaker of the second at the same time. The sound from the second speaker is simply a convenience, so that you know what is being copied, and you can play it high or low as you wish without affecting the quality of the the copy. The quality depends upon how you adjust the volume of the *first* speaker, and the *recording level* of the *second* tape recorder. When you have found exactly the place for copying on *both* tapes, you simultaneously start playback on the first machine and recording on the second, stopping both at the end of the extract. Alternatively, you can start the second machine just before and stop it just after the first machine, so that there is a brief gap between extracts. If you are making a series of extracts, you then remove the first master tape, place the next on the first recorder, find the place you want, and copy as before. With a little dexterity, it is quite a quick process.

4. *OH*, 5, 1, p. 22.
5. SSRC Research Report.
6. COHA *Journal*, 1, pp. 28–9.
7. p. xiv.
8. Course D 301, radio programme, 'The Small Household'.
9. pp. ix–xxxiii. For other examples of interpretative analysis of a single life-story, see especially Bruno Jean, 'Un Ouvrier du Textile', *Recherches Sociographique*, XVII, 1; and Raphael Samuel, *East End Underworld: Chapters in the Life of Arthur Harding*, forthcoming.
10. *All God's Dangers*, pp. 453–4.

Model Questions

These questions are *not* a questionnaire but an outline interviewer's guide—in the spirit of Chapter 6. The interviewer's directions are printed in italics. Where there is a question mark, the form of the question is as suggested; elsewhere, points for questioning are in a summarized form and need expanded wording in use.

1. The Household: Basic Information

Informant's name, present address, year of birth, marital status, year of marriage, birthplace (street or district if known).
How many years did you live in the house where you were born? Where did you live then? *Continue for later moves.* Do you remember why the family made these moves? *If family moved a significant distance:* who helped at each end, the journey, first impressions, economic effect of move, continuing contact with original home and other migrants.
How many brothers and sisters did you have? Birth order and spacing.
How old was your father when you were born? (*Prompt:* How old was he when he died? When was that?) Occupation (*If employer:* How many people did he employ?) Did he have another job before or after he became that? Did he also do any casual or part-time jobs? *Continue for all jobs until death.*
Do you remember your father ever being out of work?
How old was your mother when you were born? (*Prompt:* How old was she when she died? When was that?) Had she any jobs before she married? (*If employer:* How many people did she employ?) Did she work after she was married or not? Part-time jobs? Hours. *Continue for all jobs until death.*
Who looked after the children while your mother was at work?
If informants had a substitute parent (e.g. Grandparent), adapt questions to include throughout.

2. Domestic Routine

I should like to ask you now about life at home when you
the time when you left school. Can you describe the

form 1)? How were the rooms used? Bedrooms; other rooms; furniture. Did anyone else besides your parents and brothers and sisters live in the house? Other relatives, or lodgers? (*If Lodgers:* Where did they sleep? Where did they eat? How much did they pay?) Did your mother pay anyone to help in the house? (*If yes:* Number of servants; living in, daily or irregular; hours and wages; servants' hall and bedrooms; tasks.) Cleaning; looking after children (time spent by children with parents). Supervision and moral guidance of servants. (*If living in, adapt subsequent questions to establish part in all household activities and relationships.*) How did you get on with her? How did the housework go? Was the washing sent out? Who made or mended the family's clothes? Were any clothes bought new or secondhand? Where and when? Shoes. Did your father help your mother with any of the jobs in the house? *Prompt:* Cleaning; cooking; washing up; fires; decorating; repairs; improvements to the house. Did he dress; undress; bath you; read to you; tell you stories; take you out without your mother; look after you when she was out. Did you have any tasks you had to carry out regularly at home to help you mother and father? How long did you continue to do these tasks? After you left school? *Repeat for brothers and sisters.*

Were you expected to go to bed at a certain time in your school holidays? Did your mother or anyone else put you to bed? Did you share the bed with anyone? Who else slept in your bedroom? Sleeping arrangements of whole family. How did the family manage with washing and bathing?

3. Meals

Where did the family have their meals? Were there any occasions when they ate in another room? Who did the cooking? Where? Cooking equipment (range or gas). When was breakfast eaten? What members of the family were present? How did the others manage for their first meal? What did you usually eat and drink? Did you have anything different on certain days (Sundays)? *Repeat for midday and evening meals.* Did your mother or father bake bread; make jam; bottle fruit or vegetables; make pickles, wine, beer, or any medicines for the family? Did your father or mother grow vegetables and fruit? Did they buy any? (Tinned or dried.) Did they keep any livestock for family (hens, pigs, goats)? Who looked after them? How many times a week did you eat meat? Tinned meat? Did you ever get some extra meat such as rabbit from poaching? Who from? How often? Do you remember seeing your mother having less food so that the family could have more? Did your father have larger helpings? Or extra food (e.g. tea time or late supper)?

Were you allowed to talk during meals or not? What was your parents' attitude if you left some food uneaten on the plate? Were you expected to hold your knife and fork in a certain way and sit in a certain way? When could you leave the table? Did all the family sit at the table for the meal? How was the meal served (by whom)? *If employed servants:* Where did the servants eat? Did they have different food? What was the difference?

4 General Relationships with Parents: Influence and Discipline

Was your mother an easy person to talk to? Did she show affection? If you had any worries could you share them with her or not? *Repeat for father*
How did your parents expect you to behave towards them? As a child, was there any older person you felt more comfortable with than your parents? (Grandparents, other relations, servants.) When grown ups were talking were you allowed to join in?
What kind of people do you think your parents hoped you would grow up to be? Did your parents bring you up to consider certain things important in life?
If you did something that your parents disapproved of, what would happen? (For example, swearing.) *If punished* By whom, How, How often, Ever by other parent. Do you remember any particular occasion when you were punished? How did you feel about that?
Would you say that you received the ideas you had about how to behave from both your parents, or did one play a more important part than the other?

5. Family Activities

When you had a birthday would it be different from any other day? Presents, anything special to eat, guests.
Did you have any musical instruments in the home? Players. Was there anyone in the family who sang? Did you ever make music together as a family?
Did your parents play any games with you? Christmas Day, Easter, other festivals. Were there books in the house? Did you belong to the library? Newspapers. Magazines.
Do you remember a funeral in the family? What happened? Who attended? Did you take part? Did you wear mourning?
Do you remember a wedding in the family? What happened? Who attended?
Were you taken out visiting neighbours friends or relations? With whom? Were you taken shopping? With whom? Do you remember any other outings with your parents? Bank holidays.
Did you ever go away for a holiday? For how long? Did you do this regularly? Which members of the family went? Where? Activities.

6. Religion

[illegible] ? How about [illegible]

[illegible]

attend a place of worship or not? Denomination. How often? Both mother

and father? Did either hold any position in the church/chapel? Did you attend?
Did you go to a Sunday School or not? Outings. Choir. Temperance Club. Band of Hope. Evening classes.
What other activities organized by the church/chapel did you take part in?
Was grace said at meals in your family?
Were you taught to say prayers at night? Did you ever have family prayers?
How much would you say religion meant to you as a child? Why?

7. Politics

Did your father take an interest in politics? Do you know what his views were? Why do you think he held those views?
Do you remember your father voting in a general election? Do you know what party he voted for? Did he ever belong to a political party? Activities.
Repeat for mother.
In some places at that time men felt they risked losing their job or their house if they voted differently from their employers. Do you know if your father felt himself under that kind of pressure to vote for a particular party?

8. Parents' Other Interests

When your parents were not doing their work, how did they spend their time?
Did your mother have any interests outside the home?
When she went out what did she do? Did she ever go out to enjoy herself? Who did she go with?
When did your father get home from work in the evenings? How many evenings a week would be spent at home? How much was he about the house at weekends? How would he spend the time?
Did your father attend any clubs or pubs? When. Did your mother go too?
Did your father take part in any sport? Did he watch sport? Did he attend the races? Did he bet? Did your mother take part in any sports or games?

9. Childhood Leisure

As a child, who did you play with? Brothers; sisters; neighbours. Did you have your own special group of friends? Did you play games against other groups? Where.
What games did you play? Were you allowed to get dirty when you played? Did boys and girls play the same games?
Were you free to play with anyone you pleased? Did your parents dis-

courage you from playing with certain children? (*If yes* Why?) What did they think about children fighting or gambling in the street?

I should now like to ask about how you spent your free time when you were at school. Did you have any hobbies then? (Collecting—cigarette cards, etc.) Did you keep any pets? Gardening Did you go fishing? Walks, bicycling With whom?

Did you take part in any sports?

Did you belong to any youth organizations (Scouts, Guides)? Activities. Theatres, concerts, music halls, cinemas Did your parents give you any pocket money? What did you spend the money on?

10 Community and Social Class

Did anyone outside the home help your mother look after her house or family? (Relations, friends, neighbours) In what ways? How often?

If your mother was ill or confined to bed how did she manage? Do you remember what happened when one of your younger brothers/sisters was born?

What relations of your father do you remember? Did any live nearby? When did you see them? Where? Do you remember them influencing you in any way, teaching you anything? *Repeat for mother*

Did your parents have friends? Where did they live? Where did they see them? Did they share the same friends? Did your mother have friends of her own? Where did she see them? Did she visit anyone who was not a relation? *Repeat for father*

Were people ever invited into the home? How often? Who were they? Would they be offered anything to eat or drink? On any particular days or occasions? Would you say that the people invited in were your mother's friends or your father's friends or both of them?

Did people call in casually without an invitation? When?

People often tell us that in those days they made their own amusements. What do you think your parents did when they got together with their friends/neighbours? (Music. Games)

Many people divide society into different social classes or groups. In that time before 1918 did you think of some people belonging to one and some to another? Could you tell me what the different ones were?

What class/group (*Informant's own term*) would you say you belonged to yourself? What sort of people belonged to the same class/group as yourself? What sort of people belonged to the other classes/groups you have mentioned?

Can you remember being brought up to treat people of one sort differently from people of another? Were you ever told to curtsey, touch your cap, show respect in some way? To whom? Was there anyone you called 'sir' or 'master'/'madam'? Do you remember anyone showing respect to your parents in these ways?

In the district/village, who were considered the most important people? Did you come into contact with them? Why were they

important? *If respondent middle or upper class:* Would these people have been considered at that time to be 'in society'?

Where you lived, did all the people in the working (*or* lower *or other term used by informants*) class have the same standard of living, or would you say there were different groups? Describe a family within each group. Do you think that one group felt itself superior to the rest? Were some families thought of as rough, and others as respectable? Do you remember a distinction of this kind between craftsmen and labourers?

Racial groups, immigrants and religious minorities (clubs, bars and churches).

Do you think your mother thought of herself as a member of a class? (*Prompt:* middle class, working class?) Why?/Why not? What made her put herself in that class? (*Prompt:* own home background, her job, her type of house, your father's position.)

Do you remember anyone being described as a 'real gentleman'/'real lady'? Why do you think that was? Was it possible at that time to move from one class to another? Can you remember anyone who did?

Was your home rented? *If yes:* What do you remember of the landlord? Did your mother or father belong to any savings clubs? (Insurance; sick; funeral, etc.) Do you know what arrangements your parents had about money?

Do you remember feeling that your parents had to struggle to make ends meet? *If no:* Did they help poorer people in any way? Did they belong to any philanthropic organizations? *If yes:* What did you think about that? What difference did it make to the family when your father was ill or out of work? How often. Did you ever get help from the Guardians or the parish or any charity? How did they treat you? How did you feel about that?

11. School

Were you given lessons by anyone before going to school?

How old were you when you first went to school?

Type of school (board/private/church; day/boarding; boys/girls/mixed)?

What did you think of school? How did you feel about the teachers?

If you did something the teachers disapproved of, what would happen?

Did the teachers emphasize certain things as important in life? Manners, how to treat the opposite sex; tidiness; punctuality; ways of speaking. Did they encourage discussion? Was any science taught? Games.

What sort of homes did most of the other children come from? Were some worse dressed than others?

Were there any gangs or groups in the school?

Did you go on to another school afterwards? *If yes: repeat. If a secondary school:* a cadet corps; prefects.

How old were you when you left school? Would you have stayed longer if you had had the opportunity? Did you attend any part-time education afterwards? (e.g. evening classes).

If at university Subjects, new friends, new attitudes, influence of tutors, intellectual discussion, religion, clubs and societies, other leisure. How were women regarded at university at that time?

12 Work

While you were at school, did you have a part time job or any means of earning a little regular money? *If yes* How did you get it? (Through parents?) What exactly did you have to do in this job? How did you learn? Were any practical jokes played on you? What hours did you work? (Saturday, Sunday, half-day) Were there any breaks for meals? Did you have any holidays with pay? What were you paid? Did you feel that was a fair wage or not? (Did you give any of the money to your mother? What was it spent on?)
How did you get on with the other people you worked with? Did men and women work together? Could you talk or relax at all? (Could you play games in the breaks?) Was there a works club? A works outing? Any other entertainments for employees? Was there a presentation when a worker retired? Did any of the employers or wives visit workers and their wives at times of sickness or bereavement?
How did your employer treat you? How did you feel about him?
How did you feel about the work? Did you like or dislike it? How long did you do it for? When did you give it up? What did you do after that?
Repeat for any other part time jobs while at school
Now I should like to ask you about your first full time job What was that?
Repeat questions above, for all jobs (including part time) to retirement These questions are schematic and much fuller questions and promptings are desirable for main occupations
Did you serve an apprenticeship or training period for any of your jobs? Did you (or any of your employees) belong to any trade union/professional organization? Did you take part in any of its activities? Did you feel that employers had the same interests, or different? Did you feel that there were divisions of interest among workers?
Would you have preferred another type of occupation yourself? *If an employer or manager* Can you tell me who owned the business (partnership, limited company)? How was it founded? How was it run? How did you

[illegible]

tors share a social life together? What did the workers call you? Which of them did you know by name? Did you meet any of them outside work?

13 Home life after starting full time work/leaving school

I'd like to ask you about your life at home after you started full time work (or left school) Did you continue to live at home then? *For how*

long? *If at home:* Did you have your own room where you could entertain friends privately? *If separately:* Did you live alone or share with anyone? Describe house. Did you have any domestic help? Where did you mainly eat?
If working: Did starting full-time work change your relationship with your parents at all? How much money did you have to spend?
If not working: How did you manage for money? Would you have rather done something else? How did you spend your time (housework, social calls, family business)? Did you spend your Sunday any differently? (Church/chapel; Sunday School.) Did religion mean more or less to you after childhood? Why do you think that was? Did you start to take an interest in politics? Or later? Activities. Can you tell me something of how you spent your spare time as a young man/woman? Did your interests change? Clubs or youth organizations; sports or games (cards; tennis); dances; hobbies; outings; theatre, music hall, cinema; pubs? Did you go out in the evening? Where to? Who with? Holidays. Where; who with. Did you make any new friends—boys or girls—at this time? How did you meet them? Did you stick to a group of friends? What did you do with them? Where? Did you have any special friends at this time? Boys or girls? Were there any special places where boys and girls could meet? Where would you go with them? Were you allowed to be with them alone? Did your parents meet your friends? Did they expect to know where you were? Did you have to be home by a certain time? Did your parents disapprove of any of your activities at this time?

14. Marriage

What age were you when you married? How long had you known your husband/wife then? How did you meet? Where did he/she come from? What kind of family? How long were you engaged? Did you save up money before getting married, or not? Did your parents help you in setting up a home? Did they help you later on? (or leave you anything?) (Or by that stage, did you have to help them?) Could you describe the wedding? Did you have a honeymoon? Where did you live after you married? How many years? (Did you ever consider moving out of the area when you first married?) Where did you live then? *Continue for subsequent moves.*
How old was your husband/wife when you married?
If woman: What was your husband's job when you married? Did he have other jobs before or after? *Ask for all jobs.* Did he also do any casual or part-time jobs? *If informant worked after marriage:* How did your husband feel about your working? *If man:* Did your wife have a job when you married? Had she any other jobs before that? Did she continue working after your marriage? *If yes:* How did you feel about that? What jobs had she had since then? *Ask for all jobs.*

15. Children

Did you have any children? How many? Names and years of birth. Were your children born at home?
If woman Did you know what to expect in childbirth? How did you get on? Did you read any books about birth or infant care? *(At this point, questions about birth control could be asked.)* Did you have any medical help? How exactly? How did you feed your first baby? Did you have any difficulties in feeding? If you needed advice, who did you ask? Did you punish it when it was naughty? How? For what? How much did your husband have to do with your children when they were babies under one year?

16. Family Life after marriage

Budget and control of Household
I want to ask you how you and your husband/wife managed the house-

your wife at

If wife Did you know what your husband earned? How much of that would he give to you? Did he pay any of the bills himself? How did you decide the money should be spent? (Who chose new furniture, food, drink, doctor, church, clothes of children, husband, presents, outings, holidays, who should be invited to stay or to meals. Who looked after the garden?)

Return to section 2, and repeat with appropriately modified phrasing through to section 11, in section 4 add When your children were young did you feel that there was a right way/wrong way of bringing up children? Did you and your wife/husband have the same ideas about bringing up children, or different ideas? Did you talk about this? Was there anyone you used to talk to if you were worried about the children? Was your mother alive when your children were small? How often did you see her? Did you ask her advice in bringing up the children? Mother in law
Did you believe that girls should be treated the same way as boys when you had your children? That they should be taught the same skills and the same games (e.g. girls carpentry, hunting, boys sewing cooking dancing piano)? How did you teach your boy to behave to his sister (e.g. opening doors, carry things)?, your girl to her brother (sew for him, wait on him)?
If wife worked after having children Who looked after the children while you/your wife was at work? How did you feel about leaving the children with somebody else? Some people think that children should be with the mother all the time, others think it is not necessary and does them

good to be with other people quite a lot too. What did you think at that time?

Unless the informant has moved to another community since childhood, do not repeat the mid-section 10 sequence on social class. End the interview by asking about children's schooling and subsequent occupations.

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